



insidious Capital

**Frontlines of Value at the End of a
Global Cycle**

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INSIDIOUS CAPITAL

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INSIDIOUS CAPITAL

Frontlines of Value at the End of a
Global Cycle



Edited by
Don Kalb



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PREFACE

Don Kalb

At the American Anthropological Association meetings in Denver, November 2015, I met Ståle Knudsen for a beer. Ståle was trying to convince me that I should try to land a prestigious Norwegian grant for his Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, a *Topforsk* grant paid by the Trond Mohn Foundation, the Norwegian Government, and the University of Bergen. The department had agreed to invite me to give this a try, Ståle confided. I knew several colleagues in the department because I had been loosely engaged with Bruce Kapferer's Egalitarianism project (an ERC Advanced Grant). The European environment was in fact brimming with exciting projects in anthropology at the time. I myself was directly involved as a co-leader in a big project at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology on "Financialization" with Chris Hann (my co-director), Tristram Barrett, Charlotte Bruckermann, Natalia Buier, Dimitra Kofti, Marek Mikus, and Hadas Weiss. With Mao Mollona I was simultaneously working on a book on the "Worldwide Mobilizations" of the early 2010s with a focus on class and urban commoning. An edited collection on anthropologies of class that I had been doing with James Carrier (eds) and a group of senior and junior anthropologists with whom I had collaborated for a long while (among others around *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*) had just been published (2015). Another friend, Susana Narotzky, was leading yet another big ERC Advanced Grant project on the consequences of the recently imposed austerity on Southern Europe. Some of the same people were again loosely involved with her group. The financial crisis of the West that had exploded into the open in 2008–10, and then again with the Euro crisis of 2012–14, was slowly ebbing away at that moment, but the rise of the Right after the failed (or tamed) left-wing rebellions of 2011, in the West as well as in Eastern Europe, Turkey, Russia, India, the Philippines (Brexit and Trump would come up soon), plus ongoing fiscal austerity combined with "quantitative easing," generated a vital sense that global democratic capitalism was deeply in crisis and that anthropology had to find ways to respond to this big elephant in the room. We were all aware that much greater collaboration

than had been common in our discipline would be a boon for that. The big international grants that were boosting the discipline in the European science area (ERC, Max Planck, national institutions) were an excellent vehicle for that. I accepted Ståle's unexpected proposal and began to think about what, next to all these exciting things that were already going on in my direct academic environment, I wanted to do. I felt that, after dealing at length, theoretically and ethnographically, with the notion of class (2011, 2015, 2018), with the rise of the neo-nationalist Right in Europe (2011), with urban protest (2018), with finance, credit, and debt (2020), it was time to move up a notch in abstraction towards the concept of value *tout court*. I was interested in the (contradictory) value forms that were developing in global capitalism. And I imagined that a theoretically guided global ethnographic approach with two handfuls of projects that would be in a loose but conceptually generative conversation with each other over a longer time should be exciting and educational for all of us. Those projects would be strategically located on the East–West axis (from China to the United States) that had been so super dynamic lately, a dynamism that was both the cause and the outcome of the global capitalist turbulence that we were witnessing. I fleshed out a research proposal, “Frontlines: Class, Value, and Social Transformation in 21st Century Capitalism” (which became “Frontlines of Value”), which was subsequently chosen from among several contenders by an eminent committee consisting of Göran Therborn, Michael Burawoy, and Saskia Sassen. This book is one of the outcomes of this project.

I have many people to thank. Eldar Bråten and Ståle Knudsen were crucial for bringing me to Bergen, as were Göran Therborn, Michael Burawoy, and Saskia Sassen, who believed in the original idea and, perhaps, in my competence. My postdocs and researchers were a brilliant lot, ready for mutual engagement under the creative umbrella I had put up. Thanks to all of you, Katharina Bodirsky, Charlotte Bruckermann, Stephen Campbell, Thomas Cowan, Dan Hirslund, Sharryn Kasmir, Oana Mateescu, Patrick Neveling, Sarah Winkler-Reid; you taught me more than you may be aware of. Alina Cucu, Jaume Franquesa, Jeff Maskovsky, Ju Li, Gavin Smith, Luisa Steur, and Ida Susser participated in workshops in Wrocław and Bergen that ultimately led to this book. I personally thank Chris Hann and the financialization research group in Halle, Bruce Kapferer and his egalitarianism group in Bergen, and Susana Narotzky and her “Austerity” project in Barcelona, for sustained exchanges that have found their way in one way or another into the Frontlines project. My former environment at CEU in Budapest, which I was sad to leave in

2017, gave me a sprinkling of brilliant students as well as a set of colleagues who kept up a top notch and engaged intellectual climate. I thank, in particular, Ayse Caglar and Judit Bodnar of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology. For important ongoing conversations I thank (and here I'll have to leave out many): Alpa Shah, Lesly Gill, Nina Glick Schiller, David Harvey, Sharryn Kasmir, Sian Lazar, Winnie Lem, Mao Mollona, Don Nonini, Steve Reyna, Don Robotham, and Biao Xiang (I am meeting some of you in the Political Economy Reading Group that Don Nonini and Ida Susser have been organizing). The editorial group around *Focaal—Journal of Global Anthropology* (and *Focaalblog*) has been an inspiration and a joy throughout. All contributors to this book felt honored and excited by the supremely insightful comments that two anonymous reviewers for Berghahn Books gave on earlier versions of the chapters.

I myself have a big friendly debt to Gavin Smith that is still outstanding: he has been an invaluable and insidious interlocutor on capitalism and anthropology for over two decades, and this book is therefore dedicated to him.

— Introduction —

VALUE AT THE END OF THE CYCLE

On Frontlines and Regimes

Don Kalb



The concept of capital as a totality has to be fungible to encompass a broader terrain of determinant influences than those given by the inner core circulation of capital.

—David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Grundrisse*

This book features a set of interlocking exercises in the anthropology of twenty-first-century global capitalism. It studies capital, class, labor, livelihoods, politics, and culture in the first two decades of the 2000s, around the zenith of the latest cycle of globalization. It is therefore also a book on front matter such as geopolitics and geoculture, technology, liberalism and illiberalism, urbanism, creativity, green transitions, inequalities, surplus populations, and an assortment of further crosscutting issues that all, in shifting spatiotemporal combinations, define the historical conjuncture. That conjuncture is now getting overly pregnant with the cascading and contradictory confluences of global and local histories, with the consequent possible threats to our common future(s) as a species.

At first glance, this may seem like a petri dish of runaway themes. That dish, however, is held together by two tightly interrelated intellectual, anthropological, and political threads: an interest in 'value' — the belief that thinking about value can help us to grasp the packed, layered, and runaway realities in which we live; and an overarching vision of a powerful but uneven and contradictory capitalist geo-process, 'globalization,' which keeps our cases

together, and demands deeper ethnographic inquiry, certainly now that some of its contradictions seem to be getting close to the point of killing it—and us.

We focus on value in three senses: (1) value as what drives accumulation, the returns on capital, surplus value; (2) value as what people in all their different roles in their daily social reproduction seek to contribute to, enjoy, choose, and labor for in order to secure and maintain for themselves and for those they feel they belong to—‘use value’ would be a good term to describe this, but in a more expansive and inclusive sense than in Marx or Aristotle: the use values within and of a biography, individual as well as collective, where it touches and overlaps with that general term ‘social reproduction’; and (3) as what societies and people may explicitly claim to value in a more remote and abstract sense, and what people imagine they and their societies might want to be or become as a consequence of deliberate and sustained social efforts to get there. Some may call this ‘civilization’ or ‘culture.’ Ideology, religion, and myth are then deeply involved. I note that value (2) and (3) cannot be sharply separated, in practice or in concept, and tend to shade into each other. Our stories must then also include value’s flip side: devaluation, dispossession, violence, exhaustion, worthlessness, uselessness, lies, exploitation, and the breakdown of social reproduction.

Our ethnographic interests concern practices and observable social relationships and interactions more than just spoken or written words. We are not primarily interested in what people say their values are, but rather in how their actual relationships and common actions are imbued with practical values. The third sense of value is often the specialized terrain of certified intellectuals and publicists more than the people commonly encountered in (historical) ethnographies—people that are mostly referred to by pseudonyms rather than author-names. Our approach, though, does shed some light on the ‘civilizational’ and ‘idealist’ sense of value, even though this may appear mostly as a contradictory one.

Crucially, we want to understand why, how, where, and when those three senses of value seem to come together and/or move apart, play along with or rub up against each other.

This is where we speak of ‘frontlines of value.’¹ We see frontlines as the social relations, interactions, domains, sites, spaces, and moments where our three forms of value—the values of capital formation, the use values of the people in common, and the more abstract ‘civilizational’ values of societies at large—confront, intermingle, and intersect with each other. Such moments inevitably pro-

duce lived friction and contradiction, perhaps incubating potentially open antagonisms of use or idealist values versus accumulation and surplus value, or use value versus idealist/civilizational, or surplus for some versus the use values and civilizational ideas of others. But such moments of confrontation and intersection may also produce the opposite, collusion: collusion of common interests and desires with the accumulation of capital, and the sense that use values and surplus values positively feed back into each other. In collusion, the opposite possibility of antagonism and confrontation never entirely disappears though; or it may well be antagonistic and collusive at the same time, making ambiguity reign, producing and reflecting a fuzzy but intense politics (of discovery), with zigzagging outcomes amid bursts of popular engagement and disengagement, the sort of 'populist' politics of which we have seen much lately almost everywhere, hinting at the exhaustion of the global cycle and the arrival of an uncertain interregnum. In the end, how frontlines of value work out is always a product of struggle.

Frontlines, in our usage in this book, refers not only to the frontlines crisscrossing the social field, but also to the frontline spaces—the frontiers, the new spatial fixes—of global capitalist transformation, the geo-habitats newly 'penetrated' by capital, or by new rounds of capital; spaces that are remade and consumed by newly emerging and often contradictory composites of value and their attendant forms of life. We talk about 'insidious capital' because the global neoliberal moment has left precious few 'outsides to capital,' geographically, socially or culturally. Capital, practically everywhere, has settled deeply into our daily routines and social reproduction, even when it does not employ or exploit us directly. That is not to deny huge unevenness; nor to embrace the idea that the dominance of capital anywhere is complete, or without contradictions, or that its hegemony is stable and coherent. On the contrary, insidious capital comes by definition with intimate contradictions and intimate struggles. And it works on and within steep spatial unevenness and social divisions, often feeding perceptions of fundamental cultural alterity and opposition rather than similarity and solidarity. Across that wobbly terrain of uneven insidious capital and its intimate contradictions, then, there are infinite degrees and shades. And there are primary and secondary (etcetera) forms of capital's presence. But what has long evaporated is that pristine outside from which a coherently non-capitalist perspective could be on offer.

Above, I have reduced the concept of value to three different meanings. But one could further simplify it to two, more in common

both with daily usage and with common sense social science. For the social sciences, the concept of value has been as central as shambolic. It has appeared in empirical research as a rather descriptive category mostly in one of its two basic versions: a singular 'value' or a plural 'values.' The singular version appears mostly in economics and political economy, including in Marxism; the plural is deployed in anthropologies and sociologies of people's ideals, preferences, desires, and attachments. The first is universalizing, the second particularizing. Value's potential centrality for social thinking, we suspect, turns around the possibility of the singular and the plural versions being brought together, not in the sense of becoming identical or symmetric, let alone 'reducible to each other,' but as in a dialectical and dynamic co-constitutive relationship that works out, unevenly and rather unpredictably, but inescapably, in the theater of time and space. The latter brings us back to the frontlines of value in the three more analytic senses discussed above. The entire history of Western social thought can be read as an ongoing alternation between trying and failing to grasp those dialectics.

When I speak of 'value' here, I will refer then to both the plural and the singular versions at the same time; or better, to the promise of a dialectics of the two. The 'value' in the title of this collection refers to the *problematique* of their contradictory and dynamic intersection. Value as used here thus refers not to a field of straightforward empirical data called 'values.' Rather, ours is a conceptual and historical problematic. It is certainly not a non-empirical undertaking; it is just not *empiricist*. Our quest for value encapsulates a strong sense of a *historical dynamic*, or better a spatio-temporal-social dynamic. The dialectic of value between its singular and its multiple versions is what produces history and process, and vice versa: it is 'world making,' in its material and immaterial dimensions. We will come back to that.

With this double vision of frontline, spatial as well as social, this is inevitably a book about politics—indeed, about the politics of value. For us as anthropologists, this concerns first of all the deep politics of the vernacular and the everyday, the politics of life itself in its local moments and global dimensions: the vernacular undercurrents of on-stage public politics; the less revealed layers that often only seem to become of interest to the daily news when they create unexpected or violent rupture; or, more routinely, when they get sanitized into the meek form of the certified opinion survey (sometimes called 'value survey').

At the same time, the book is not ‘just’ about those vernacular undercurrents. It is also about the overt geopolitics of capital formation, and about the associated politics of local and global governmental elites that underwrite and gain from the new capitalist forms. More precisely, it is about the constitution from above and from below of the political, as it is driven by our three analytical senses of value, their collisions and collusions. In this book we seek to reach into the depths and varieties of that dialectic by doing what Michael Burawoy has called ‘global ethnography’ (Burawoy 2000, 2009; also, Kalb and Tak 2005).

In this Introduction, I further elaborate on values and frontlines through an engagement with two major bodies of work: the Marxist ‘law of value,’ on the one hand, and ‘anthropological theories of value’ on the other. For the latter, I will discuss at length the visions of value as proposed by David Graeber, Terence Turner, and others against a longer-standing anthropological pedigree. For the former I will take a closer look at the ‘value controversies’ among Marxists in the 1970s. This Introduction, then, offers two subsequent detours through these relevant landscapes of theory (which may be skipped by those less interested in that). I will argue for superseding both bodies of value theory, the one ‘monistic,’ the other ‘plural,’ and suggest a new one that is not so much meant as an ‘integration’ then as a dialectical supersession of the two, in the classic meaning of that term: turning value from either a culturally particularist idea (anthropology) or a universal covering law (Marxism, but also neoclassical economics) into a dynamic relational totality, an identifiable field of forces. That totality will center on the notion of ‘value regimes,’ but again not exactly in the way that the latter is often used in the social and human sciences, as will be explained in due course. This, we will then train on our strategically chosen cases, which will be discussed at the end of this Introduction.

A First Detour on Value—with and against David Graeber

Let us then, by way of introduction, begin by looking closer at David Graeber’s *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (2004, see also 2013),² a well-read text in anthropology. How did the promise of integrating the plural and the singular versions of the concept fare under his watch twenty years ago? Graeber was inspired by Terence Turner’s work on value, and proclaimed he was following in his

Marxist footsteps. Like us, Graeber suspected that greater programmatic and integrative use for the concept of value should be possible and desirable for anthropology and the other social sciences.

This was Graeber's first book-length publication and it meanders, like his later books, festively through a landscape of theory, topics, and visions. I will focus here on the conceptual landscapes that emerge from this meandering, and on their longer theoretical pedigrees and possible conceptual affordances. What then, after all the meandering, is ultimately Graeber's own "anthropological theory of value"? How do Marx and Mauss—the latter being David Graeber's core inspiration—cohabit in it? Do they cohabit at all? What are the book's possibilities and blind spots?

Graeber developed his 'anthropological theory of value' against the intellectual and political background of what he calls 'the bleak 1990s.' He is very explicit about it: neoliberal hegemony, globalized capitalism, economics as dominant social imaginary; a reigning post-structuralism with its reduction of politics to 'creative consumption' and identity, both in anthropology and other social and humanist disciplines. While structure and history had gone out of fashion, he writes, action and agency had become cynically equated in social theory to mere individual market choices. Before 1989, Bourdieu had worked out 'habitus' as the connecting concept between structure and agency (and Giddens had been busy with similar issues). Graeber swiftly passes him by for the focus on dominance and power games that underlie Bourdieu's project—in Graeber's eyes, another symptom of the cynicism that he saw around him. For Graeber, at this point in his career as well as later on, it seemed paradigmatic that anthropologists are dealing with people in relatively egalitarian societies and with people who desire (a core concept for him) to escape precisely from such cynical power games. He then commences to propose 'value' as the exact point where structure and agency meet. After an interesting interlude on Roy Bhaskar (1975) and critical realism, a program that offers an epistemology of forces, tendencies, and processes rather than still objects, he emphasizes that his idea of value aligns with that critical realist agenda: setting open-ended dialectical processes in motion, configuring social forces, generating tendencies and countertendencies. What is this value and what are the anthropological traditions that help him shape it up?

The shortest way to answer that question is to refer to a concept that is all but foundational for David Graeber's work: 'constituent imagination.' While he borrows that term from Italian autonomous Marxism (authors such as Virno and Negri, see below), he links it

to a long anthropological pedigree that connects Klyde Kluckhohn, Marshall Sahlins, Terence Turner, Louis Dumont, and others. Value emerges as what people find important for the full realization of their lives. This is in fact not very different from the common-sense meaning of value in various European languages. Graeber's value is thus emic and idealist, like the values we commonly share and express.

While this notion seems initially not very different from, let us say, Talcott Parsons, David Graeber would not be Graeber if he did not loudly refuse Parson's structural functionalism: Graeber's value emphatically does *not* work to solidify the stable reproduction of a social order. On the contrary, it feeds the social imagination subversively, both collectively and individually, and it is both agonistic and liberating. In the social processes that it sets in motion, people die, strive, love, compete, believe, pray, moralize, estheticize, sacrifice, fetishize, and whatnot. Value is about making differences, and about ranking and proportioning them. De Saussure's structuralism may be essential for how our language and therefore our imagination works, Graeber concedes, but, following his teacher Terence Turner, he adroitly endorses Vygotsky's 'generative structuralism' and shifts the weight from *langue* to *parole* and towards 'signifying material action' rather than just syntactic meaning. Hence his interest in ethnohistory and the telling and remembering of (hi)stories. Stories become part of 'constituent imagination in action,' the practiced struggle for individual and collective autonomous becoming, and in how such struggles are actively remembered. In terms of a program, he seems to come close here to the Gramscianism of the early British cultural studies school and of Stuart Hall, though without ever noticing (compare Crehan 2016). But the difference with that approach remains crucial: while for Gramsci hegemony and cultural domination is a key issue, Graeber has nothing with hegemony. Like his fellow anarchist James Scott, he does not believe it exists. Graeber's people have an ingrained and robust common sense, and simply walk away in open rejection of any effort at domination.

Paradoxically, David Graeber, the great egalitarian, in the end concedes that his notion of value is perhaps not that different from Louis Dumont's (Dumont 1966, 1982), a student of Levi Strauss and the ultimate conservative theorist of hierarchy as foundational value. That is, except for Graeber's emphasis on process, action, and agency; for him, while the social is a totality, it is ridden by ambivalence and contradiction. 'Constituent imagination,' in his text, often seems for all practical purposes more the desire of individuals or groups and moieties *within* societies than of societies as a whole, as it is with Dumont.

The central contradiction for him is between value-driven imaginative desires and bleak pragmatic realities. Such realities appear to him as corrupted and requiring revitalization, an infusion with fresh desires, which is the work that value allows us to do. Again, this is a quite common-sensical meaning of the term—and neatly liberal too.

Where is Marcel Mauss here, Graeber's most basic theoretical and political inspiration? Graeber includes Mauss at all levels of his approach, and spends some very interesting pages introducing him as the key thinker for a non-cynical anthropology and for a humanist Left, a thinker who in his days rejected the Bolsheviks for their recourse to state terror and bureaucratic *diktat* while criticizing their recourse to the New Economic Policy and to capitalism in 1921. Mauss, of course, appears as the quintessential theorist of the gift and of egalitarian societies. Graeber may criticize him for his romanticism, but he fully embraces his notion of 'everyday communism' as the value-glue of all human sociality. He also likes the basic methodological notion of the 'total prestation,' Mauss's holism. The core values of a whole society are reflected in each and every one of its parts, informing the imaginations and actions of its members. While Graeber does not discuss this explicitly, I suspect that he does deem Mauss's cultural holism too static for his purposes. Holism, for Graeber, does not come in the form of a 'still life' painting, and does not take away the perennial dialectics between desire and pragmatism. On the contrary, it feeds them and it is fed by them. Graeber is a dialectical Mauss, but just as much an idealist.

In all of this, Graeber seems to follow Terence Turner closely. And indeed, in a much later preface to a collection of Turner's essays (2017), Graeber remarked that he wrote 'Value' in order to make the notoriously complex texts of Turner more understandable for a wider public. The 'Value' book was conceived as a gift to Turner.

Turner was strong on Marx (see for example 2005), perhaps the most outspoken Marxist in the anthropology of the 1990s. Marx was strong on totality and dialectics, but of a less idealistic kind. Graeber in this book imagines setting a Turnerian Marx into a dynamic conversation with Mauss. How does that work out? How does his idealist and voluntarist concept of value as constitutive imagination relate to Marx's conceptions of value—use value, exchange value, and surplus value? Most importantly, how does it relate to Marx's 'law of value'? For Marx, the latter is a shorthand formula for talking about the social relations of capitalist accumulation; social relations not as a given synchronic social order but as a compelling transformative logic over time, a tendency, an immanent logic of history.³

Graeber is sympathetic to the young Marx, who wrote for the emancipation of humans from their self-constructed religious fetishes. Marx argued that these were the mere products of humanity's own creative powers of collective imagination, not the forbidding gods that demanded them to obey. The young Marx fits seamlessly to Graeber's own agenda, as his discussions of fetishism in this book show. But the post 1848 Marx of capital and labor receives short shrift. Graeber repeatedly complains about the 'convoluted language' of Marxists. He does not like the Marxian vocabularies, and prefers for instance to talk about 'creative powers' rather than about labor power.⁴ Labor hardly appears in this book on value at all.

David Graeber finds Marx mainly interesting, he writes, for his approach to money—and here we find an early clue for his later book on debt, which made his career as a public intellectual—so not capital, not labor, but money. He emphasizes that, for Marx, value and money-price are not the same. But in the next pages, Marx's value disappears and Graeber gets stuck with money and prices (which are of course a holistic system too). With Terence Turner, he notes that 'socially necessary labor time'—a core element of Marx's 'law of value'—is also inevitably a cultural construct, but he does not reference the extensive discussions about that centrally important concept for Marx at all. Nor does Graeber seem aware that it is this precise concept that helps Marx make his central discovery: a particular relational form of value under capitalism that consistently operates behind people's backs, and is therefore ontologically the opposite of the self-conscious, autonomous 'constituent' value choice that Graeber is celebrating. At the University of Chicago, Graeber was apparently not exposed to Moishe Postone (1993), whose work is all about that. Nor does he seem aware of the value debates among Marxist theorists of the 1970s—in particular, Diane Elson (1979a), whom Turner had read closely. Considering the number of pages dedicated to them, Marx's value appears to Graeber as intellectually far less compelling than Kroeber's, Kluckhohn's, Parson's, or Dumont's. In the next step, 'socially necessary labor time' is then reduced to a rather static cultural concept for determining, via prices, how important we find particular items of consumption as compared to other items (e.g., cars: 7 percent of yearly consumer expenditures in the US in the late 1990s). Graeber's Marx, surprisingly, seems in the end not to be about value, capital, or labor at all, but primarily about prices and consumption. In doing so, he joined his other Chicago teacher, Marshall Sahlins (1976), who too looked at capitalism primarily as consumption.

In these passages it is also as if David Graeber at once forgets about his earlier discussion of Roy Bhaskar and his forces, tendencies, and processes. ‘Socially necessary labor time’ in Marx is precisely such a thing: a dynamic and system-wide dialectical relation between abstract capital and abstract labor that produces immanent concrete tendencies, indeed compulsions, that people and places cannot escape from (Harvey 2018). It is the basis for Marx’s ‘law of value,’ which Marx well knew was in fact not a law but a tendency. As living labor does its daily work for capital, labor productivity would systematically be driven up as a result of the competition among capitals and of the consequent class struggles from above with labor, and from below by labor, leading to mechanization, automation, concentration, and the overall tendency towards the roundabout capitalization of social life. This includes the regulation of labor, its repression, incorporation, and rejection. Over time, labor would thus lose any sovereignty over its own conditions of life and social reproduction, except at those times when labor was strong enough to bargain for some social reforms aimed at pushing up standards of life and labor within the capital equation. Apart from being disciplined in its wage claims and lifestyles, lest capital would move to cheaper and harder-working places, labor would also be forced into largely paying for its own education, housing, care, and reproduction, or face devaluation and degradation by disinvestment—and, of course, it would have to face the inescapable ontological uncertainties of life and status under capitalism. The same would be true for cities, regions, and states that might well fail to compete within a globalizing capitalism, and would literally be up for grabs through devaluation and dispossession. All of this, including the geographically uneven, imperialist, and war-mongering repercussions, is a logical part of the tendencies inherent to Marx’s ‘law of value.’ But in Graeber’s book, Marx is never allowed to play to his own strengths: in the end both capital and labor, the two elementary relational positions whose combination produces not just use values and exchange values but, crucially, surplus value—the very returns to capital that are a key driver of social change in a capitalist world—simply disappear. According to David Harvey (2018), Marx sees capital as ‘value on the move.’ But in Graeber that sort of value is just moved out—only to come back big time, and with ‘anarchist concreteness,’ in his later and celebrated books on debt (2011) and bullshit jobs (2019).

Constituent imagination is David Graeber’s core concept. It was a concept that came from Italian Marxist *post-operaismo* authors who were impressed by labor’s refusal to work for capital in the Italy of

the 1970s and 1980s after having lost a series of violent industrial confrontations. Young workers now preferred to seek the creation of autonomous worlds of life and labor in small collectives outside the wage nexus. This is shortly mentioned by Graeber; and he imagines, like James Scott, that his egalitarian kinship groups similarly refused to engage with hierarchical centers of power and simply walked away to constitute their own desired egalitarian societies at the margins. Graeber thus executes a further radicalization of the original concept, which talks about evading the wage nexus in order to build autonomous worlds of commoning, but does not carry any hint of a mass exodus out of Egypt towards a promised land and a new separate society, to use a biblical analogy. Following Gregory Bateson's idea of 'schismogenesis,' Graeber even argues that all societies were, at some point, formed out of such mass rejection of earlier power centers (see also Graeber and Wengrow 2021). This type of universal claim can only go so far but is arguably somehow correct for a limited pool of cases, and certainly more limited for the last 500 years than for the 4,500 before (if we follow Graeber's 5,000-year timeline). Mass migrations out of hierarchy and 'old corruption' did produce some new societies in the modern period, such as the USA, the Netherlands, Argentina, Greece, and Israel. But rather than 'on the outside,' these often became far more capitalist than the societies of origin—another indication of the extent to which capital simply escapes the Graeberian vision.

In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, Graeber firmly dismisses Appadurai's 'regimes of value' notion (1986) for the latter's neoliberal fixation on consumption. Appadurai recently returned the compliment on Twitter by claiming that Graeber's anthropology was an entirely traditional one. Graeber gave early twenty-first-century anthropology a new self-consciousness in refocusing on egalitarian desires of autonomy. But Appadurai is unfortunately right in one respect, though he may not entirely have meant it so: the anthropological theory of value that Graeber envisions in this book is emic, particularistic, and idealistic. It returns us to classic bounded fieldwork and a bounded notion of culture befitting its 'primitive' subjects. The book has no references to Eric Wolf, Immanuel Wallerstein, or anyone else in anthropology and wider surroundings dealing with space and multiscalar analysis of 'complex societies' and of the value processes associated with the expansion, operation, and contestation of globalized capital. Except for a journalistic type of political economy, there is in fact hardly any serious political economy at all here, not even an anthropological political economy—a school that

traces itself back to leading scholars like Wolf, Mintz, and Leacock, and one steadily ignored by both Graeber and Sahlin (who imagined themselves to be in competition with it).

David Graeber later repaired that lack of political economy with *Debt* (2011; but see for example Kalb 2014) and *The Dawn of Everything* (2021; with David Wengrow), which brought long-run and deep global histories back into anthropology, *pace* Appadurai's diminutive charge. But while *Debt* may have been incubated during the writing of this value text, its historical and processual method, which was certainly innovative, is not yet anticipated here.

To wrap up: David Graeber was a creative moralist and utopian who was uniquely in tune with the resistant Western mood of the times (1995–2015), from the alter-globalists to Occupy, including the popular desires for autonomy and for finding 'the outside' — the contemporary left-wing version of freedom, so to speak. But his anthropological work did not at all anticipate the simultaneous rise in many places of the neo-nationalist and illiberal Right, which was certainly also about value and values. The right-wing surge was also about autonomy and sovereignty: the universal sovereignty of particularist hierarchies rather than of universalist egalitarian values (see Kalb 2021, 2022, for further discussion; Bodirsky, this collection). Nor does Graeber's 'Value' anticipate a situation where core central bankers and enlightened economists write books about the economics of the green transition with 'value' prominently in the title, seeking to appropriate the political desires of the Left's popular risings of the 2010s for new large-scale technocratic projects of accumulation (Carney 2020; Mazzucato 2019; see also Bruckermann, this collection). And finally, in the excitement of retrieving some pride for the classic traditions of the anthropological discipline, in Graeber's 'Value' we also seem to have willfully forgotten the advances in 'the anthropology of complex societies' and indeed of 'world society,' including some Marxist and Gramscian ones that are precisely about value.

David Graeber began with Terence Turner's anthropological Marxism of value but replaced him along the way with Marcel Mauss and Marshall Sahlin. We need the law of value back—but not without some serious tinkering. First, however, some preparatory discussions on anthropology, value, and the notion of regimes of value.

Anthropologies of Value in Search of a Dialectic

Hadas Weiss (2019) is delightfully radical in her observation that embracing values of the idealist variety and in the plural is exactly what Western middle classes do under liberal capitalism in order to compensate for, and obscure, their lack of control over capital's blind drive to accumulate. The liberal state and Roman property law will assure that this remains the case as long as private property is foundational for the social contract, while there continues to be some liberal space for 'civil society' and 'democracy' to circle festively around that. The law of value, of course, will somehow push against idealist values if they become too anticapitalist, for example by shifting capital to societies where they are not. Examples of such large-scale disinvestment are endless, and this is partly what globalization has always been about: the capacity of capital to move to new locations, find new profitable resources and exploitable subjects, and, while doing so, punish and discipline old ones that imagined they could claim 'more than their due.' Weiss is perfectly correct to point out that such failure is all but written into the very origin and definition of the bourgeoisie itself, as well as the historical middle classes associated with it; as is, accordingly, the effervescent ritual dance of 'values' around the 'iron' operation of the 'law of value.' All of this becomes visible at once if one keeps 'value' and 'values' together in their uneasy tension and immanence. That is our starting point.

At least two more things are notable in the anthropological record on value. The first is the recurrent conceptual polarity of 'the gift' versus 'exchange.' Here we meet, among others, Marcel Mauss again. Much of the ethnographic research that deals with this classic bipolarity is on Melanesia, and studies kinship-based island cultures that have fallen under the imperial control of distant capitalist centers. Some of this work feeds into a claim for the radical alterity of 'egalitarian Melanesian gift societies' as compared to the capitalist West; this, despite the emergence of substantial private wealth on these now urbanizing Pacific islands—wealth derived from transnational mining, real estate, and remittances. Gift and exchange, then, seem not so much opposed cultural principles as different moments within evolving social relations, and recurrent types of interactions embedded in different spheres and scales.

The second notable issue is that each attempt to install value in the center of anthropological discussion inevitably seems to lead to endless fragmentation of vision and proliferation of topics (Graeber 2013; Pedersen 2008). Graeber has been both surprised and annoyed about

this (2013). With Terence Turner, he had always imagined that value could serve as a coherent and magnetic conceptual core for anthropology, holding politics, economics, and cultural symbols together as *ensembles*. In the light of Graeber's own slide into the 'expressive totality' of idealist core values, we should not be surprised that it has not worked out that way. The counter-enlightenment and (German) idealism often seem too heavy a burden within the conceptual heritage of the anthropology discipline, certainly in its American version. In anthropology we look for 'value' and we go off into any and all geographic and ethnographic direction and always come back with values, values, and more values, all different and supposedly incommensurable. On the way we have lost the dialectic between value in the singular and value in the plural, the law of value and the politics of constitutive imaginations.

Some in anthropology have been well aware and critical of this. An interesting recent collection by Angosto-Ferrandez and Presterudstuen (2016), for example, lucidly points to such problems and bravely announces a return to Marx. Unfortunately, its effort to escape the polarity of gift versus exchange leads it to focus on another celebrated polarity: exchange versus use values. The book adds interesting reflections on an older anthropology of money, exchange, and markets (Parry and Bloch 1989). But exchange versus use value again steers away from the law of value in Marx. The latter was Marx's real discovery, and reaches far beyond mere exchanges on markets. It points to the inescapable compulsion of accumulation under capitalism, and to capitalist class power over space. Exchange values are only a medium for capital to realize itself. It is not exchange per se that sets and keeps capitalism in endless motion—exchange among humans is thousands of years old—but surplus value. This newer anthropological work thus inadvertently falls back upon the classic anthropological fare of 'separate societies,' 'separate cultures,' difference, and classical place-based ethnography. Beyond generic ideas of 'North' and 'South' there are few tools here to conceptualize the larger processes of globalized place-making within and against which contemporary societies are constituted. The law of value, capital itself for itself as a global teleology, escapes this otherwise interesting project.

Narotzky and Besnier (2014) and Collins (2017) have opened another promising line of anthropological work on value. Their engagement is with value, moral economy, class, labor, and contestation in Northern capitalism. These are not the only anthropological publications doing so, but they are of special interest here for elevat-

ing the notion of value into their very titles.⁵ Value, in this work, is primarily associated with popular discourses of ‘moral economy’; that is, with ideas, claims, and practices of justice, dignity, and use-value. Their work concentrates on the austerity effects of neoliberal governance in crisis areas of the Global North (Southern Europe and the mid-US respectively). While their work focuses on a well-defined political issue such as austerity in a relatively coherent region such as the depressed parts of the Global North, our project in this book has a different mission: discovering the emerging manifolds of ‘insidious capital’ within a wide landscape of global interconnected unevenness, and trying to understand a broad variety of value forms and intimate struggles in the wake of the globalization of capital.

We propose to go beyond the reigning bipolarities of gift versus exchange, and use value versus exchange value, moral economy versus market economy. We suggest that the notion of ‘value regime’ can do good integrative work here, provided we install a generative dialectic at the very heart of it. Value regime has generally been used in either of two meanings. First, coming from World Systems Theory and its offspring, ‘value chain analysis,’ it describes worldwide production and value chains. At its best it looks at the different types of discipline exerted by the global chain on various networked locations of production, and their consequent relationships of culture and class (see also the chapter by Neveling, this volume). Secondly, it has appeared in anthropological studies of consumption, where it has pointed at the practices that structure the valuation of particular commodities in fields of marketing and consumption. The first body of work is strong on the law of value but has remained slightly ‘economistic’ in its scope.⁶ The second discovers ‘cultural’ practices around the signification and hierarchies of items of individual consumption.

With value regime we want to go beyond the economism of the one and the culturalism of the other. A value regime, for us, is a further specification of a value form. We are seeking a concept that encapsulates at one and the same time: (1) the disciplinary pressures of the globally operating law of value on particular sites and populations in an uneven and combined landscape of production and reproduction; and (2) the (counter)pressures, desires, and (counter)claims of such situated populations, including their collusions with capital, as they grapple with their multiple ‘constituent’ historical values in relation to the pressures in and of the present. For us, then, the idea of value regime refers to a singular, dialectical, and multiscalar field of pressures and counterpressures, both material and discursive. But let us first look in more detail at that elephant in the room, the law of value.

A Second Detour: From Law of Value to Frontlines of Value

The basis for Turner's Marxist-anthropological perspective on value was taken from a particular strand of critique within the famous 'value controversy' of the 1960s/70s. That controversy played itself out around the so-called 'transformation problem' within Marx's labor theory of value (for overviews, see Elson (1979b) 2015; Fine (1986) 2016; Steedman and Sweezy 1981). The transformation problem was about how value and price were related in Marx (see Harvey 2019 for what may be the currently dominant reading among Marxists about values and prices). Researchers around the Marxist economist Piero Sraffa believed, to their own dismay, that they had finally shown that there were no tools in Marx to translate reliably the volume or contents of concrete labor spent on making a commodity into its market price. In other words, the labor theory of value, which assumed that prices were determined by the volume and skills of labor power, was refuted. The only empirical thing we have, they felt forced to conclude, are prices, not values; and prices are simply formed at markets, equilibrating supply and demand, having no systematic relationship with labor inputs beyond the obvious. Unsurprisingly, this was seen as a major intellectual victory for neo-classical economics versus Marxism. The victory was 'won' by an economist, Sraffa, who had started out as an avowed Marxist, a good friend of Antonio Gramsci.

In the 1970s, however, a new generation of heterodox economists and more theoretically inclined Marxists turned this issue radically around. Diane Elson (1979a) offered the crispiest rereading. She concluded that Sraffa had criticized not Marx's but Ricardo's labor theory of value. Marx had developed quite a different theory—one, in the words of Elson, that could better be called "a value theory of labor." For Marx, the difference between these theories was expressed in the difference between what he called the 'value of labor *power*' and Ricardo's 'value of labor.' Marx had regularly shown himself to be fond of his discovery of this difference: the concept of labor *power* encapsulated for him a huge advance in his understanding of capitalism.

What did this mean? It meant that labor under capitalism would always appear to capital not primarily as concrete living labor but as abstract labor power in relation to all other abstract labor power in the system as a whole. For Marx, labor power was the value form under which labor appeared. Its value was not inherent, but was

always a proportion of, and exclusively determined in relation to, all the labor power simultaneously deployed in the global system. For capital, labor existed as ‘abstract labor,’ producing monetary exchange values and capitalist surplus values on a world market whose totalities of value and of competitive relationships determine the proximate price, and, broadly, the conditions and social forms of any living labor in situ. The social reproduction of any living labor, in short, was determined by equations, equivalences, and differentiations on the level of the world market.

Recall that Graeber preferred to talk about ‘creative powers’ rather than labor power. This was his characteristically anarchist effort to wish away all of these determining complexities, and speak directly, prefiguratively, to how we would want things to be. But as these could not be wished away, they returned to him later in the all-too-concrete—and, frankly, slightly privileged and Western—‘bullshit jobs’ that he condemned for their waste of creativity (Graeber 2019).

In Marxist terms this means: labor is conditioned by ‘socially necessary labor time’ and by the ‘relative surplus value’ that it generates. ‘Socially necessary’ here refers to the general state of labor productivity in the system, an approximate average that enforces global standards of productivity and efficiency on all labor, no matter where. This is where ‘the law of value’ appears in full. Marx had argued that capital, in order to maintain the going rate of return under conditions of competition with other capitals, was compelled to steadily increase ‘relative surplus labor’ and ‘relative surplus value,’ and it would do so via the formation of fixed capital: automation, machines, rationalizations of the organization, value chains. He knew it would also require the ‘accumulation of labor’ employed throughout the system, which implied ever-growing urbanization, large-scale housing sectors, transportation, education, health, and so on. But substituting living labor with fixed capital would, over time, also equalize and reduce the overall rate of surplus value among capitals. Marx called this “the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.” Thus, capitalism would enter into inevitable crises, and ultimately into a terminal crisis. Meanwhile, capital would seek to compensate the relative decline of the surplus by expanding the sheer mass of labor and capital. It would do so by integrating new territories and working-class populations in an expanding array of circuits of circulation (Harvey 2021). The law of value thus worked to enforce recurrent cycles of upgrading and expansion, and, at the same time, as its flip side, spirals of devaluation and abandonment. This dynamic implied an uneven differentiation between and among laboring populations

and capitals; concentration; and technical, organizational, social, and cultural innovation. To these were later added Kondratieff cycles, spatiotemporal fixes, dispossessions, disenfranchisements, and so on. Capital, as Harvey (2019) summarized, is value on the move, with no loyalty to place or person, with shape-shifting crisis and struggle as its key characteristics.

Terence Turner's anthropological perspective on value stayed very close to Marx by rightly linking this value theory of labor with Marx's notion of fetishism. Commodity fetishism emerged from the apparent reality under capitalism that social life had become equated with the circulation and exchange of commodities. Exchange values were the apparent real that moved social life as a *deus ex machina*. Turner's argument was that kinship-ordered societies showed similar patterned dialectical relationships between how such societies conceive of (kinship) labor and the fetishes they adore—in their case, for example, celebrating manliness and the elders. Abstract labor, of course, only emerged under capitalism, as did 'socially necessary labor time.' But, Turner argued (2008), the co-constitutive relationship between modes of production and the precise type of fetishes that people valued was a general one.

David Harvey (2019, for example) has been going out of his way to emphasize that Marx saw the law of value not as a universal law of economics but rather as an immanent historical tendency that was playing itself out over time and space amid endless 'huffing and puffing.' I derive these last playful words not from David Harvey but deliberately from Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Rather than being the assured outcome of successive market equilibria, this immanent historical tendency was always also the contingent outcome of ongoing class struggles at all levels in the system, and throughout all its various, evolving, and interlocking institutional domains; and this against a turbulent background of recurrent economic crises and violent ruptures.

Thompson's 'huffing and puffing' does not mean that the idea of the *law* of value is futile. Paul Krugman once quipped that at any one moment in time the growth of labor productivity (= law of value) may seem trivial, but in the long run there is almost nothing more momentous. Before we get to that long run, however, it really is the huffing and puffing that matters. At the same time, class struggle itself is steadily fueled by the law of value's long-term disruptive efficacy, which in the memorable words of Leo Trotsky is nothing less than "the whip of history." That whip is violent, dispossessive, and exploitative, but it also often appears as a potent promise of

modernism and futurism, demanding that ‘reasonable’ people align their creative energies with its demands, and that those who seem reluctant or incapable of doing so should be re-educated, pushed aside, or violently rolled over.

The idea of frontlines enters our discussion in the middle of this minefield, where the universalist economics falsely associated with the law of value turns into an open anthropological, historical, and geographical inquiry into both, immanence and contingency, both kept in tension: from covering law of global economics to emplaced anthropological huffing and puffing.

Insidious Capital: Regimes and Frontlines

This open anthropological inquiry looks at the points at which the multiple frictions and contradictions of capital, and indeed, more fundamentally, of capitalist *society*—planetary as much as local and intimate, insidious indeed—emerge as lived relations of value: frontlines of value, lines of maneuver and opposition, of pressure and counterpressure, individually and privately as much as collectively and publicly. We thus shift the perspective away from the purportedly singular logic of capital, on the one hand, or the plural, autonomous, and ‘constituent’ group-value choices on the other, and we try to follow in the tracks of the manifold, complex, and uneven dialectics of value. We accept that such dialectics are deeply shaped by variegated legacies and practices of class power and class struggle—from above, from below, and sideways—some of that struggle driven by identifiable actors, some of it more diffuse and relationally induced and therefore appearing as abstract pressures exerted by the system, “immaterial but objective” in Harvey’s words (2019).

That means that we need to try to think of class in both classical and in widely expanded new ways, refusing any reductionism of an economic and/or cultural-discursive kind. We embrace a complex anthropological and relational class analysis⁷ that is attuned to the multiscalar, multistranded, and proliferating nature of contemporary capital accumulation, which deploys a quickly shifting array of mechanisms of exploitation, rent-extraction, dispossession, and devaluation in ever-shifting forms and combinations (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; Kalb 1997, 2015). Those forms and combinations are about labor exploitation as of old (and very old). But they are just as well about moments of exploitation, extraction, and alienation within social reproduction, from kinship and care to education, leisure and

consumption, urban and spatial form, the nation-state form; our air, water, and ecology; and, indeed, alienation from within, and about the imagined ‘constitutive’ value choices that people seek to uphold. It is the critical junctions between those forms that matter (Kalb and Tak 2005) and that we seek to discover and identify.

One could argue that there is no outside to capital, that the whole of social life has now been usurped by the rule of capital and its myriad forms of intimate reach, as Harvey (2018) and Hardt and Negri (2018) have done. We agree, but we prefer to think with the idea of ‘insidious capital.’ Google Translate explains ‘insidious’ with “stealthy, surreptitious, sneaky, cunning, Machiavellian, slick, deceptive” (among others). Insidious points at the ways in which capital has infested itself variably and cunningly into the insides of our very relationships of everyday life—including that sphere that a tired liberalism used to call ‘private.’ Insidious capital is as affective as it is effective. We do profoundly anthropological class analysis, and we are aware that this differs from what the dominant economic and sociological concepts of class suggest us to do. While we all study inequality, our approach tries to evade the reifications, essentializations, and reductionisms that social science often produces. Frontlines of value and the idea of insidious capital may help us to do so.

‘Frontlines of value’ thus supersedes the idealist and materialist bipolarities that we have discussed. No law-like determinations nor exalted free-value choices. It projects a world where structured contingencies and contingent structuration set limits to, and exert pressures on, actual lived, emplaced, cultural and historical outcomes. Pressures and limits constantly weigh on capital, labor, social reproduction, politics, place, value and values. And while such pressures and limits cannot be derived logically from any single abstract maxim, neither are they just random. Without going into a detailed theoretical specification of the ‘who, what, and why’ of such pressures and limits here, it is not hard to see that what must emerge at the end of such reasoning, and as a provisional outcome of such processes, is something like the earlier-mentioned idea of value regimes. Recall: Value regimes describe a dialectical and spatially networked articulation, an ensemble, of practiced and at least partly institutionalized, always somehow contradictory, ‘value and values,’ an ensemble that exerts its hegemonic pressures and sets its limits for a certain period of time and for a definable swath of space. In our ethnographic explorations, frontlines of value capture the intimate struggles within and against the lived, interlock-

ing, and uneven value regimes of insidious capital that animate our subjects.⁸

Frontlines of value abound around three types of ‘hidden abodes’ (see Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). For Marx, the factory, and privately organized material production generally, was the key hidden abode within which exploitation and ‘surplus labor’ was obscured—hidden literally behind its privately owned walls. Labor remains the core class relation in twenty-first-century capitalism.

In this book, most chapters look at labor in one way or another, including its divisions, allocation, norms and standards, the rate and forms of exploitation by capital, but also its capacity to organize and talk back. The authors look at the dialectics of abstract and lived labor, as the value theory of labor would suggest (in particular, Campbell, Bruckermann, Mateescu and Kalb, Hirslund, and Neveling). But social reproduction is a hidden abode too. Social reproduction of labor and its values as organized outside the workplace includes the classical feminist issue of gendered labor and patriarchy within kinship, friendship, and public life. But it also includes human habitats, housing and ground rent (Bodirsky, Cowan, Hirslund, Winkler-Reid, Mateescu and Kalb); education and skills (Winkler-Reid, Mateescu and Kalb); care and health; leisure; urban form; pervasive structures of credit and debt (Hann and Kalb 2020; Kalb 2015, 2023); the earth and ‘nature’ as both human habitat and object of exploitation and commodification (Bruckermann).

Twenty-first-century insidious capitalism marks a proliferation of hidden abodes within social reproduction where costs, labor, hardships, and uncertainties caused by parasitic forms of accumulation are shifted onto working populations and onto the metabolism of the earth itself. This happens in often highly differentiating ways. It sets up urban cores of accumulation versus designated landscapes for green offsets and ‘leisure,’ offering green and tourism rents (Bruckermann, Hirslund). And it sets up (often quasi-) middle classes (Mateescu and Kalb; Winkler-Reid; Hirslund; Kasmir; Cowan), who imagine themselves to have the merit to be incorporated into the expansive logics of capital, versus surplus populations who are apparently ‘without productive function’ (Campbell; Mateescu and Kalb; Kasmir; Bodirsky)—and much in between. These uneven differentiations have momentous consequences for potential solidarities and rivalries, for perceived deservingness and merit, for ideas of worth and worthlessness, and for the capacity to like or hate one another (Campbell, Cowan; Kasmir; Mateescu and Kalb). All of this is part of the frantic dance around values within contemporary

capitalism, exacerbated by the apparently unstoppable shift towards further financialization, rent extraction, monopoly, and geopolitical competition as core modalities of accumulation.

These three types of hidden abodes—production, reproduction, and nature—should be seen as relational fields from which capital increasingly seeks to exact ‘free gifts’: labor, energy, care, and resources that are not paid at their ‘cost of reproduction.’⁹ There is a key global frontline of value in twenty-first-century capitalism at work here, which marks a threefold struggle: first, a struggle ‘from above,’ driven by capital and state classes seeking to maintain the returns on capital in the face of the tendency of profits from labor exploitation to fall. This has further consequences, such as the increasing concentration, financialization, monopoly, and mobility of capital. Secondly, protective struggles diffusely as well as assertively waged by middle classes seeking to be among the ‘winners’ from the rule of capital, while continuing to proclaim their ‘freely chosen’ values—liberal-cosmopolitan, green, nationalist, reactionary-authoritarian, and/or anticapitalist. Thirdly, ‘revindicative struggles’ (Smith 2014) from below, more often diffuse than targeted, against this ruling pro-capitalist alliance and its effort to suppress, marginalize, devalue, and divert the potentially anticapitalist push backs from below—some of which may become universalist and democratic, others authoritarian and particularist. The capacity of capital to impose free gifts is not given. If rights are equal, power decides, as Marx summarized the basic law of liberalism. Free gifts must be carefully nurtured within reigning hegemonic forms of rule, and their mythologies of progress and fairness. They must be seen as natural, justified, and in the general or national interest. Few hegemonies these days seem stable. All are selective and partial, imposed on increasingly unequal and indeed polarized populations. State and non-state violence seems increasingly necessary, on top of the sheer insidiousness of the capital relation itself.

Global Ethnography at the Peak of the Global Cycle

In a dramatic and synchronized global moment, state borders, cities, and workplaces closed down in early 2020 amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The shock of isolation and immobility was immense; the sudden reappearance of the state and bureaucracy literally on the street and close to the bodies of citizens after four decades of

neoliberal globalization was startling. Beginning in China in January 2020, and reaching the West and much of the rest of the world within a few weeks, the pandemic was a global threat to (national) public health. But it was also a long-predicted effect of capitalist globalization and fast-track planetary urbanization, as we knew it.

In February 2022, as the pandemic was seemingly somewhat under control, the next shock materialized. Putin's Russia, in an aggressive semi-fascist reaction against its subordinate position since 1989, invaded Ukraine, a *de facto* US protectorate. Xi Jinping's China backed Putin's side, at least ideologically. The Communist party-state had stuck to zero-Covid policies, and had just again closed down public life in Shanghai and other big cities. A year earlier, in the midst of the pandemic, Xi had imposed Chinese sovereignty over a rebellious semiautonomous Hong Kong. In the wake of the Ukraine war, he now stepped up military threats to Taiwan. Both Putin and Xi, in the context of domestic economic stagnation and increasing inequalities that chipped away at their autocratic legitimacy, swept up patriotic nationalism against US 'unipolar power,' cynically appropriating the once postcolonial idea of a more democratic multipolar world for their own imperialist projects.

The West responded with sharp economic sanctions and a militarized, neo-idealist liberalism that sought to deny, and fight, not only the 'authoritarian' Eurasian axis but also its own domestic authoritarian tendencies. In the aftermath of the financial crises (2008–12), right-wing nationalism had experienced a powerful ascent in the West and parts of the Global South, as well as in China and Russia. Many nations in the Global South were keeping a neutral stance on the Ukraine war in order to keep relations open with Russia and China as well as with the West. Erdogan's Turkey, on an autocratic and institutionally heterodox path of its own (see Bodirsky's chapter), emerged as the key semi-neutral beneficent of the new East–West belligerence, in open denial of its NATO membership. Saudi Arabia, in a similarly sharp divergence of its postwar alliance with the United States, openly sought collaboration with Russia and China. India, along with China and Turkey, now imported the discounted Russian oil and gas that used to flow to Europe. The announced Green Transition, now more genuinely sought by the liberal West and the enlightened parts of capital, but clearly coming without the support for the Global South that was once promised, and against the immediate interests of Russia, Saudi Arabia, and OPEC, increasingly appeared as a non-trivial background to the collapse of the Western-led global order.

In consequence, key market equations of that erstwhile global order were gyrating and reversing. Ukraine and Russia accounted for 30 percent of global grain production; Russia for 40 percent of European gas supplies. Taiwan, the next likely theater of war, signed up for more than 70 percent of the global production of silicon chips. China in the last forty years had become the industrial workshop of the world. Everyone was now dependent on a closed-down China for demand as well as supply. Not surprisingly, inflation in the system as a whole rose to levels not seen in forty years of globalization. Driven by food and energy prices, and magnified by capitalist monopolies and speculative financial flows, it percolated into all markets and world regions. Central banks began stepping up interest rates, seeking once again to win their fight of the 1970s, even though this crisis had very little to do with excess domestic demand or 'wage-price spirals.' The long deflation period of 1990–2020 seemed at once over, a deflation that had been driven by the search of Western capital for cheap labor in emerging markets (see Neveling, this volume). A global hunger alarm was sounded. The IMF warned of widespread sovereign defaults in the Global South, to which China in the 2010s had become the largest lender. The decline in 'extreme poverty' in the global system since the 1990s (less than 2.25 USD per day), much of it due to the rise of China, was now reversed. The 'Green Transition' was at once put on hold as multilateral internationalism collapsed and investments were switched back towards extremely profitable 'dirty' energy. Meanwhile, the Global North had been enduring the hottest summer ever in 2022. Wild fires were raging outside cities in the US and Europe. Even Siberia was burning. Floods had devastated parts of Pakistan, and hurricanes were destroying parts of the Caribbean. Draught was destroying harvests in global production sites such as in Argentina, the US Midwest, the Mediterranean, and Ukraine.

The promise of 1989 of an open and peaceful world order anchored in Western-style liberal institutions, and with a globalized market-driven economy, was now openly declared dead. To us as a spread-out team of scholars, it was becoming clear that we had been doing global ethnography around the peak of the global cycle. That cycle had gone into reverse under our very eyes—as had happened to previous globalizing cycles, in 1873, 1914, and 1973. It had all been predicted, we were not surprised, and yet it was a shock.

The value contradictions discussed above were a deeper cause behind the more proximate empirical ones; contradictions between globalized capital, the market, national sovereignty, and various

monopolies (technology, energy, etc.)—in particular, the contradictions between global and domestic accumulation, inequality, hegemony, and regime legitimacy. And behind that, the contradiction between the capitalist imperative of infinite growth and the definite finiteness of the earth, humanity, and its resources.

The global order predictably fractured along East–West lines. The big Eurasian postsocialist polities, Russia and China, were managing their internal class conflicts by leveraging their (potential) national-imperial sovereignty against Western domination, targeting territories—Ukraine, Taiwan—that historically they could legitimately consider their own. But they were also seeking a form of domestically managed accumulation partly outside the orbit and control of Western capital and the global regime of value. ‘Political capitalism’ and ‘state capitalism,’ in the early 2010s still emerging as cautious answers to dilemmas of national development by the likes of Erdogan, Orbàn, Putin, and Hu Jintao, were now unreservedly fired up by imperial neo-nationalisms and national security concerns. In 2022, these crystallizing big-state capitalisms began to rewrite the terms of the global order.

We had deliberately been working on the East–West line too, seeking to address ‘development’ as well as ‘postsocialism,’ and cognizant of the fact that it was on this axis rather than the North–South one that the contradictions of the thirty years of the neoliberal global order might become most consequential; not only in dismantling, in practice and ideology, ‘really existing socialism,’ but also in industrializing and urbanizing China and India. Our cases were unashamedly selected on the ‘dependent factor,’ as sociologists might say. Western-led globalization since the 1970s had helped to set up China and parts of the Global South as the new workshops of the world (see Neveling’s chapter). In the West, this had led to deindustrialization, stagnation, and deepening social inequalities. It had also led to sharp political polarization around issues of cosmopolitan liberalism and nationalist illiberalism, with strong subtexts of class, race, and gender (Kalb 2011, 2014, 2022). There had also emerged a search for new urban and regional growth paradigms around higher education, ‘creative cities and immaterial labor’ (see Mateescu and Kalb, and Winkler-Reid). China’s industrialization and urbanization led to a worldwide scramble for commodities, raw materials, food, and energy. Latin American and African economic growth in the twenty-first-century had largely depended on this rising Chinese demand. But this had also boosted the demand for tourism, leisure, education, and ‘creativity.’

We were interested in locating us broadly on this core East–West axis of capitalist globalization, looking at multiscalar value regimes—dynamic ensembles of single/plural value and their shifting frontlines—around labor, climate, urbanization, urban transformations, the rise of illiberal and neo-nationalist politics and the liberal counter-mobilizations confronting the authoritarian trends that seemed almost overdetermined.

The Chapters

In the opening chapter, Patrick Neveling lays the ground for the book as a whole. He describes the fundamental historical role of special economic zones (SEZs) as frontlines in the emergence of neoliberalism’s global value regime. Today’s more than 5,000 zones with more than 100 million workers across 140 nations, many in China, can be traced back to development policy innovations in the US dependency Puerto Rico in the late 1940s. From there, ‘free trade zones’ spread as frontlines of a globalizing value regime of labor, pushing down the average costs of transnational manufacturing in the system while battling against the global rise of labor in the postwar period and postcolonial sovereignties in the South. The ‘free trade zone’ regime boosted novel relations between capital, state, and labor, and advocated export-led industrialization controlled by Western capital as the royal road to development for the Global South. Carried by a dynamic alliance consisting of US actors, several United Nations agencies, private sector pressure groups, and postcolonial/postsocialist comprador bourgeoisies, the zones shaped a coming neoliberal world of racialized and gendered exploitation in export industries—in fact, islands of manufacturing exempted from national regulations; and a willed transfer of sovereignty to transnational capital. By the late 1970s this had ushered in a New International Division of Labor (NIDL), whereby the South was becoming the new location for labor intensive manufacturing; a condition that perfectly suited China’s condition in the 1970/80s as the last big (socialist) state in which the peasantry had not yet been dispossessed—a billion extra workers would soon be added to the global system, leaning down on standards of working-class reproduction everywhere. Neveling identifies the zones’ value regime as a global labor arbitrage designed to pit workers in selected less-developed nations against workers in other developing countries, as well as against organized labor in the core. It also required that dependent states take up international loans to be channeled

as subsidies to transnational capital. The NIDL was thereby both a cause for the debt crisis of the third and second worlds in the 1980s as well as a solution, as indebted states on IMF support were forced to seek hard currency incomes from export manufacturing. Here we see the neocolonial relationship emerging that came fully into its own after 1989. Importantly, this regime comes with omnipresent myths of ‘middle-class jobs’ and ‘catch-up with the West.’ As a rule, however, such advertised ‘goods’ do not easily arrive, and if they do arrive, they rarely stay long. But despite the obvious global race to the bottom, and the visibly racialized and gendered exploitation and oppression in and around the zones, such myths are seductive and tenacious, and easily capture the imagination of aspirant middle classes.

Stephen Campbell continues this exploration of the workings of the global value regimes of labor. His in-depth local ethnography of an industrial slum in greater Yangon, Myanmar, complements Neveling’s global view. Myanmar is one of the last countries in a wave of mostly postsocialist states that have turned themselves into a new capitalist frontline of value since opening up to liberal democracy and international capital. Such latecomers could often not do other than internalize the now-established value regime of the free trade zones and its associated ‘low cost—high exploitation’ labor standards. Campbell here explores the relationship between ‘non-normative,’ ‘marginal’ forms of capitalist labor that are often considered ‘surplus labor,’ and the simultaneous and ongoing ideological and cultural work of devaluation of such labor in countries that are imagining themselves to be ‘modernizing.’ He notes that amid a veritable proliferation of precarious labor arrangements in the global economy, dominant economic and anthropological visions have conspired to marginalize the latter’s economic significance, either by ignoring them as not truly (or not yet) modern capitalist, or by painting them as local or ethnic ‘identity.’ Campbell makes two further related observations. First, such unequal, uneven, and heterogeneous labor arrangements have always been integral to capital accumulation, in the present as much as in the past; which suggests that capitalism, despite its recurrent ‘middle-class’ promises, does not seem capable of doing without masses of downtrodden labor. Secondly, the discursive devaluation of these ‘marginal’ forms of labor (as either unproductive or as identity) complements the ongoing dispossession and disenfranchisement of the people involved. This includes their persistently low remuneration as well as the recurrent political-legal oppression that confronts them. Is it coincidental that just before the

very moment that the global neoliberal system began to fracture, Myanmar's postsocialist colonels reimposed military rule, targeting especially the 'ethnic minorities' and 'marginal' labor?

While China continues to loom large in the reproduction of the global value regime for its massive pools of exploited (migrant) labor and breakneck urbanization, Charlotte Bruckermann reminds us that China's rise is locally imagined too as the making of an 'ecological civilization' — a powerful ideological promise of the Communist Party to China's aspiring urban middle classes. Putting a price on carbon emissions, whether through markets or taxes, is considered central to ameliorating the environmental catastrophes that plague the new China. From emissions exchanges to low-carbon living, different kinds of 'green arithmetic' (Moore 2016) and carbon accounting suffuse China's environmental politics, as it does those of the advanced countries. Ecological governance and emissions policies frame carbon as an alternative measure of value beyond the usual monetary metrics of capitalist growth. Yet, Bruckermann explores via four ethnographic cases in both urban and rural China how intimate struggles surrounding carbon reveal that the efficacy of carbon does not quite lie in an alternative value beyond capitalist logics. Rather, 'carbon as value' allows business-as-usual to continue while presenting the inevitable contradictions between economic growth and environmental sustainability, capital accumulation and political legitimacy, financial debt and green credit, as calculable and manageable trade-offs. 'Carbon as value,' however, has highly uneven, exploitative consequences, and is as such an inescapable new front-line. These insidious contradictions are inherent in an emergent 'carbon theory of value,' circulating in Chinese as well as global environmental governance, which serves to privatize profits and socialize the risks of the accelerating ecological crises. Inevitably, Bruckermann notes, they also threaten our common global futures as carbon increasingly becomes a harbinger of 'anti-value.'

The sped-up urbanization of the Global South has been a major outcome of the post-1989 neoliberal order, and it serves in its own right as a circuit of accumulation and a frontline of value. The Green Revolution in agriculture in the 1970s produced planetary land-hunger/land-shortage, as peasants everywhere were under pressure from declining food prices, diminishing returns on labor and investment, and rising ground rents, all associated with the capitalization and industrialization of global agriculture. This, while national states in debt were often forced by the IMF and the World Bank to abandon public price-supports and marketing boards. The consequence

was peasant dispossession from major land and resource grabs, often in the form of an incremental process of impoverishment and out-migration, like in Campbell's Myanmar (see also Bryceson, Kay, and Mooij 2000; Li 2014). Land and urbanization, thus, is a key frontline of value, key too to the popular politics of modernizing states and to the management of domestic accumulation. China, India, and Turkey are the most significant examples, with their large populations and massive urbanization programs.

Tom Cowan, in his chapter, examines the local struggles to enclose and commodify rural land on the edges of Gurugram, once India's flagship private city. Shifting focus away from the more spectacular instances of state-led dispossession, the chapter explores how fledgling alliances of agrarian elites and corporate real estate engage in vernacular and speculative property-making strategies to forge urban real estate from the rural landscape. He shows that projects of capitalist accumulation in South Asia are often decidedly agrarian, shaped by agrarian class relations, production networks, state and financial institutions and modes of rule (see also Krupa 2022). His work traces how complex and opaque agrarian property regimes—forged through colonial and postcolonial agrarian development—are creatively repurposed by dominant landowning classes in order to impress private property claims. On India's urban frontline, complex agrarian tenures, unmapped territories, and flexible bureaucrat materials play a key role in securing enclosures. These urban frontlines are sites of heady articulation, wherein normative capitalist forms and class relations are creatively and provisionally forged with agrarian tools. Capital's movement into the Indian countryside is insidious and not just coercive, as it once appeared in Nandigram for example (Steur and Das 2009). It modulates class-caste hierarchies, territorial ambiguities, and 'fuzzy property' to build a flexible consensus for futures that are bound to rentier accumulation. This consensus is broadly supportive of Modi's Hinduist-neoliberal politics, which in the end may be about rising ground rents for the propertied, more than anything else.

Ground rent is also the basic driver for Kathmandu's emerging luxury-tourism sector, as explained in Dan Hirslund's chapter. Nepal is a small, landlocked, post-revolutionary, post-conflict, and post-disaster state that has traditionally sent its surplus labor into the construction sectors of India and the Gulf. Now it has chosen tourism as one of its key development frontlines. Historically an insignificant tourism destination in economic terms, but with spectacular nature on offer, a new class of local industrialists have begun to switch their

surpluses out of manufacturing and into the construction of tall and spectacular 4- and 5-star hotels in fast-growing Kathmandu—this, despite the devastating earthquakes in 2015 that brought the high-rise real estate market to its knees. What accounts for this seemingly frivolous investment in conspicuous property, and what kind of changes does it entail in the country's fragile socioeconomic fabric? Hirslund shows the unexpected connections between labor processes in the construction sector and in the running of these luxury hotels. These two growth sectors, construction and luxury tourism, are indicative of wider trends of labor polarization in this postrevolutionary country. The rising cost of expert knowledge in high-rise construction is offset by consistent downward pressure on the social reproduction of mobile gangs of laborers called in from the countryside. Meanwhile, the internationalization of the top-tier hospitality industry subjects the local luxury market to new competitive pressures coming from global brands such as Hyatt and Hilton, and the standards of service that are associated with them. The internalization of such global standards within the labor regimes of luxury tourism in Kathmandu causes deep shifts in the 'traditional' labor compacts between hotel owners, management, workers, and unions, transforming the nature of work and career as well as management. Hirslund's chapter shows Nepal as a counterintuitive example of how accumulation via the ground rent percolates insidiously into manifold social relationships, here as elsewhere.

Katharina Bodirsky studies another case of ground-rent-driven accumulation. Erdogan's Turkey is starkly invested in ongoing urbanization and the expansion of the construction industry. It is a case too, like India (and Hungary, Russia), of authoritarian political development based on a largely neoliberal marketization and global incorporation process. Bodirsky puts her finger on a very specific kind of value frontline. She looks at processes of political dispossession during Turkey's latest state of emergency, as Erdogan's authoritarian-populist and centralizing project was accelerated, responding to a failed coup d'état. The mass dismissal of state personnel and the closure of institutions by emergency decree deprived people such as teachers, professors, and journalists of their livelihoods, stigmatized them as terrorists, and denied them further political and social existence. She shows how such dispossession was wielded as a tool within an authoritarian hegemonic project that was inextricably wound up with the various phases of development of a heterodox growth regime that relied heavily on ongoing urbanization, financialization, and the construction business. While

such political dispossession was aimed at the politically dissident ‘middle classes,’ it served to shore up Erdogan’s faltering hegemonic project during a crucial moment of crisis. It also entailed new contradictions, which might as yet be its undoing in the longer run, as new counter-alliances form against the authoritarian direction of the Turkish state. In this, Turkey is a stark example of a wider set of illiberal nationalist-imperial cases of value struggle that all emerged around the peak of the global cycle—Hungary, Russia, India, Brazil, and the Philippines, as well as yet undecided Western cases such as the United States (Kalb 2022). Frontlines of value become manifest here in the experiences and struggles around manifold processes of dispossession that will leave residues that future political projects will inevitably have to confront.

With Neveling, one could argue that the outsourcing of manufacturing from advanced capitalist countries to the peripheries had been the key element in the neoliberal globalization package of the last half century. However, from the late 1990s onwards, this outsourcing process began to include ‘business process’ and IT services (see also Peck 2019)—in other words, routine white-collar administrative jobs. This new wave of outsourcing was critical for the rise in profitability of Western corporations in the new millennium. It also contributed powerfully to a new type of export-driven urban economic growth in countries like India and the Philippines, with the million-plus jobs in IT around Bangalore as a classic example.

After 2005, the same happened in the postsocialist countries of Eastern Europe, countries that were now part of the EU, a ‘near abroad.’ Until 2005 or so, transnational manufacturing capital had been responsible for most economic growth in the region outside the capital cities. But after 2005, IT and ‘business process outsourcing’ became *the* driver of renewed urban growth. IT became in fact *the* icon for new middle-class formation after the postsocialist collapse, in particular in the university cities. Cluj-Napoca, the largest university town in Transylvania, emerged as the single most successful Romanian case. Mateescu and Kalb, in their chapter, puncture the local mythology of outsourcing—including its latest ‘creative’ and ‘disruptive’ narratives—exposing the contradictions that drive this global frontline of value. They show that, rather than ‘creativity’ and ‘smartness,’ the local boom in IT was once more driven primarily by the rising urban ground rent, combined with persistent educational neoliberalism that left students scrambling for money. It was these two urban forces that pushed poorer students, in particular those coming from the countryside, into self-exploitation. Mateescu and

Kalb point at the high labor turnover in the IT industry, the young age of its workers, and its pervasive 'dropout' syndrome. That dropout syndrome was not limited to the industry, and included the institutions for higher education: working students left their studies, and studying workers gave up on the shopfloor. This was the insidious condition of possibility for capital growth via IT in Cluj and similar places in Eastern Europe: 'free gifts' of self-exploitation on the altar of growth and aspiration. Against a background of all-round rural stagnation, and insecurely poised between exploitation, precarity, 'corporate pampering,' and an awareness of getting wages well above the national average, IT converts and dropouts struggled to articulate an effective counter-politics. There was not a politics of labor and unionization, at least not yet; the industry's growth was still too fast for that. Mostly it was a politics that asked for more of the same neoliberal goodies delivered by the IT boom. Local policy makers and entrepreneurs, seeking to move up the ladder of value, boasted the narrative of local creativity and talent, and compared the city in the Carpathians with Boston and Silicon Valley. Mateescu and Kalb find skeptics among the workers consciously embracing an everyday 'politics of leftovers': the sobering recognition that the standards of valuation and exploitation across the global value chains of outsourcing are cruelly uneven and not naturally privileging Cluj—something that is, of course, fundamental for the outsourcing phenomenon itself. The call for an urban socialism geared to depressing the price of social reproduction is, under the postsocialist conditions of catch-up, as yet a faint one, but it exists.

Sarah Winkler-Reid shifts our analysis of education-driven urbanization towards Northeast England. The region around Newcastle is known as a classic site of massive deindustrialization as industrial capital globalized and abandoned parts of the old core. It also voted for Brexit in 2017. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork on construction at a time marked by the paradoxical combination of huge debt-driven investment in educational institutions and brutal cuts in local public budgets as austerity was announced after the financial crisis, this chapter focuses on the perspectives of both local politicians and construction industry professionals who sought to make a 'positive difference' in the urban region. In this context, 'value' represented an important concept for them to explain both what they were doing and why they were doing it, and was a device through which they harnessed their moral projects to economic processes and to sustain hope for a future that worked. These projects were inevitably informed by 'the half-life of deindustrialization' (Linkon

2018), against which the actors situated themselves within personal and regional histories of labor. Shifting scales, and moving beyond a place-based account, value then also becomes an analytical concept for the author to make visible the interconnections of specific forms of legislation, interest-bearing capital, and the debt relations that drive education-sector-based urban growth. For local politicians and construction professionals, as well as anthropologists working in local universities such as herself, the nature of value as simultaneously multiple and singular, is at stake, Winkler-Reid realizes.

In our final chapter, by Sharryn Kasmir, we complete the East-West arc of our frontlines of value narrative. The world-shocking Trump victory in the 2016 US election put 'right-wing populism' finally into the White House. As has been analyzed at length, this was driven by a shift of 'traditional' blue-collar working classes in classic industrial areas away from Hillary Clinton's Democrats and towards a rhetorically pro-worker nationalist campaign, seeking to 'Make America Great Again' (the 'MAGA tribe'), not unlike the nationalist class alliance behind the British embrace of Brexit in that same year. Neoliberal globalization and the related stagnation and degradation of working classes were the deeper cause. The contradictions of postsocialist left-liberalism finally came back to haunt the Democrats, as they had done earlier on the European continent (Kalb 2011, 2022). In the United States, Thomas Frank and others (Frank 2005, Lind 2020) had long analyzed how the Conservatives had been successful at luring workers into their anti-worker neoliberal free-trade politics by campaigning on their conservative cultural agenda. But it was only with Trump that their economic and cultural agenda was finally integrated into a new type of white-workerist American nationalism. While Trump's campaign revolutionized the Republican Party from within, Sharryn Kasmir located herself in Reading, a classic postindustrial Pennsylvanian town that was once the capital of US socialism. Reading and surrounding Berks County voted for Trump in 2017. Kasmir became interested in understanding the new fragile class alliances that emerged to counter Trump in the 2020 election in the middle of the pandemic, while Black Lives Matter was mobilizing against Trumpian racism. In this chapter she analyzes the emergence of a left-liberal political realignment in the now majority Latinx city and the surrounding suburban and rural, majority 'white' county. Reading/Berks was a deeply divided region. Decades of deindustrialization had diminished the once substantial power of labor unions, and widened a social, economic, and political gulf between the poor urban core inhabited by new immigrants from Latin America, and

the suburbs (the opposite spatial division, it should be noted, of our European cases). The election of Donald Trump had fanned the flames of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. But the Trump shock also spurred the creation of new social movements. Kasmir discusses the three class segments that were at the heart of the left-liberal realignment here and elsewhere in the United States: an inner-city-based educated precariat, immigrant workers, and white suburban middle-class liberals. This chapter looks once more at the frontlines of labor and liberalism and shows that an anthropological perspective on class formation as emerging from and within actual political struggles can help us grasp how the ‘essential relations’ among the manifold and divided groups of people in Reading/Berks helped articulate a social movement that beat Trump convincingly in 2020.

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shaped immensely by a set (several sets) of amazing intellectual and political friendships. This includes my former students. It hurts me that I cannot mention you all here and I am therefore avoiding writing down any particular names. I am sure you know who you are—each of you, invaluable.

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Notes

1. Massimo de Angelis is perhaps the only other author who has deliberately used the notion of ‘frontlines of value.’ There is a notable development in his thinking over time. In his *The Beginning of History* (2005), the frontlines emerge between different realms of value. Marcel Mauss shines through here. There are the values of the commons, and there are the values of capital. The first are by definition non-monetary, potentially altruistic, and modeled on the gift, foundational for society and sociality; the second are monetary, exchange based, profit driven, economic, instrumentalist, and individualist. All of this is not unlike Graeber, with a similar romantic belief in ‘everyday communist’ values and commoning. The self-conscious confrontation of these opposed domains of value is what De Angelis’s frontlines are about: commoning versus exchanging. In his later book, *Omnia Sunt Communia* (2016), his vision is less idealist and essentialist, less Maussian too. Here, there are no longer any spiritually defined separate essentialist domains that wage ontological battle with each other. Within any and all domains of human interaction the confrontation between capital and commoning can now be located, depending on the capacity and will of people to confront the organized interests of capital and the ‘society of economics’—and depending on their capacity to create material and meaningful practices of commoning. The commoning has also lost its automatic association with communism, and De Angelis is

- ready to acknowledge that commoning can also be exclusionary, conservative, and fascist. There are serious problems with *Omnia Sunt Communia*, in particular its Parsonian drive towards elaborate formal system building, but the direction of De Angelis's thinking on frontlines of value comes close to how I would like to think of it.
2. I am acutely aware that instead of David Graeber, I could have discussed the writings of a group of 'moral and ethical value' anthropologists around Michael Lambek, James Laidlaw, and Joel Robbins (thanks to Chris Krupa for pressing me to make this explicit, see Afterword). However valuable their work, Lambek (2015, 2021) and Laidlaw (2014) are theoretically transfixed on an issue that I find utterly dated, the 'non-commensurability' of 'ideas' and 'structure.' Methodologically speaking, there is an underdeveloped sense of history, space, and social process and struggle here, which reduces their concerns to synchronic and ontological ones. I have worked on moral and ethical issues in the context of actual material/immaterial lived processes, and my concern, along with contemporary Marxism, has been with coevolution of the material and the immaterial. In the theater of time and space, any supposed 'non-reducibility' turns inevitably into dense intersection, interweaving, mutual dialectical co-constitution within 'whole and lived histories' within uneven landscapes of change. This is what David Graeber knew, and why he is more interesting for me to grapple with than this group. I share Kapferer and Gold's critique (2018), see my own short characterization (Kalb 2018). The truly interesting thing is that Graeber failed to make 'value' work in the way he said he wanted, which is precisely where our volume enters the discussion.
 3. I broadly follow in the footsteps of contemporary readings of Marx's *Capital*, such as by David Harvey (2019, for example).
 4. Note the connotative overlap with the neoliberal concept of 'human capital.'
 5. Other relevant items, for example: Kalb and Halmai 2011; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Narotzky and Goddard 2016; Kalb and Mollona 2018; Rakopoulos 2018; Campbell 2018, 2022; Powers and Rakopoulos 2019; Nonini and Susser 2019; Bruckermann 2020; Narotzky 2021; Kasmir and Gill 2022.
 6. Anna Tsing's work is an exception.
 7. Some might prefer 'intersectional' above 'relational,' but I want to avert a descent towards a vocabulary that is mainly about 'identities.' We are interested in social forces, pressures, and configurations along the lines of Roy Bhaskar (1975).
 8. See Note 1 on the work of De Angelis.
 9. Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) prefer 'institutional domains' rather than 'relational fields,' and speak about 'boundary struggles' between those fields rather than 'frontlines' — nuances of difference working toward a similar goal.

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— Chapter 1 —

SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES

The Global Frontlines of Neoliberalism's Value Regime

Patrick Neveling



Introduction

The continued rise in the number of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is one of the defining characteristics of the world economy after the global financial crash of 2007/8. In 2006, one year before the crisis began, researchers from the International Labor Organization (ILO) counted more than 3,500 zones in more than 130 nations with around 66 million workers employed in zone factories (Boyenge 2007). Thirteen years later, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD) *World Investment Report* (WIR), a lead document in international economic development policy, ran with the subtitle *Special Economic Zones*, and gave the numbers at 5,400 zones in 147 nations, with more than 100 million workers in 2018.

Promoting “greater participation in global value chains” as an antidote to low Gross Domestic Products and low per capita incomes, the WIR expressed pleasure that five hundred more SEZs were in planning, and declared SEZs as the way forward for developing nations seeking to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) and export earnings (UNCTAD 2019: iv). A year later, the World Bank's *World Development Report 2020* (WDR) sang from the same hymn sheet. Subtitled *Trading for Development in the Age of Global Value Chains*, the WDR championed the global outsourcing of production in SEZs, with the latter lauded as “islands of excellence” where national governments provide “the resources needed” by foreign investors (labor,

land, water, electricity, and telecommunications) to operate without the “burdensome rules for business” otherwise present in national laws (World Bank 2020: 6, 46).

Looking back at the historical development of SEZs, the WIR and the WDR are part of a constant “research” promotion for SEZs from World Bank and United Nations agencies as well as from private sector corporations like KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers (Akinci and Crittle 2008; Currie 1979; Economist 2015; Farole and Moberg 2014; UNIDO 1978; World Bank 1992). Such “research” also stood at the cradle of the world’s first SEZ-style program, implemented in the US-dependency Puerto Rico, where the Boston-based consultancy corporation Arthur D. Little (ADL) recommended government subsidies to attract mainland manufacturing capital with tax and customs holidays, lax labor laws, and government-guaranteed profit margins, while US Treasury Department research claimed that Puerto Rico would be unable to sustain itself as a sovereign nation without US-mainland access. From the 1950s to the 2000s, a constant influx of other private sector consultancy companies, politicians and bureaucrats from the rapidly growing number of postcolonial nations, new United Nations agencies, and declining Western imperial powers joined the motley crew of ADL, US-American government agencies, and Puerto Rican politicians to spread the SEZ model across the geopolitical divides of the Cold War and its aftermath to feed the desire for capital to produce high profit margins (Neveling 2015a, 2015b).

Against the seven decades of pro-SEZ ‘research’ output, several ethnographies document worker struggles against abusive labor regimes, huge profits for zone factories, uneven and combined world-market incorporation, gendered exploitation, and the plight of migrant labor in the zone’s spheres of influence (Campbell 2018; Heyman 1991; Prentice 2015; Wright 2006; Yelvington 1995).¹ Criticism also comes from local and international trade unions, political parties, global movements such as the anti-sweatshop campaign, and researchers from the ILO. At times, even US Senate subcommittees and UN organizations have reported about workers’ rights violations, and criticized the global race to the bottom in wages and working conditions as well as tax evasion by multinational corporations in the world’s zones (Chisolm et al. 1986; ILO 1998; Marhoz and Szymanski 1996; Select Committee 1953; World Bank 1992).

This chapter develops a theoretical and ethnographic paradigm for an anthropology of SEZs as frontlines of neoliberalism’s global value regime, based on twelve years of research on the global historical anthropology of SEZs. A key finding from that research was

that the zones operate with a dual surplus extraction mechanism. On the one hand, national and regional governments cover capital's reproduction costs via the provision of material and immaterial zone infrastructure. On the other hand, an ever-increasing number of zones competing for investment facilitates a hypermobility of capital, which makes it easy to find and exploit ever new cohorts of workers, and diminishes the latter's organizational power (Neveling 2014a, 2015c, 2017b, 2017c, 2020). Linking this to Don Kalb's framework for an anthropology of value that combines a dialectical and a historical perspective (Kalb, Introduction), the following section establishes a theoretical framework that places the SEZ value regime in the wider operations of the capitalist world-system. Understanding SEZs as integral components of that world-system overcomes mainstream anthropology's long-standing orientalist framing of non-Western populations as untouched by capitalism's singular value regime. Returning to the two key components of the SEZ value regime, section three provides a paradigm for ethnographies of exploitation and public asset-stripping in the zones. The following sections on SEZs as "no islands of history" and on gendered exploitation in the zones exemplify the theoretical and ethnographic approaches based on recent published works.

Theorizing the SEZ Value Regime as a Component of the Capitalist World-System

Special Economic Zones have transformed environments and communities across the globe, and contributed to the neoliberal globalization of manufacturing, services, and supply chains. Expenses for the setup and operations of the zones are covered by national governments, and backed with loans from leading lenders in international economic development. As nation-states waive most rights for tribute collections so that a range of taxes and customs for imports, exports, capital gains, and capital repatriations do not apply in the zones, other revenue streams from leasing factory spaces to collecting income taxes from zone workers become crucial (Neveling 2017b). Zone operations and zone openings thus require a powerful credo, which claims that developing nations with abundant labor supply and low wages will attract manufacturing relocations from advanced capitalist nations as soon as they invest in the construction of industrial zones and factory buildings, and set up development banks, planning boards, zone authorities, and other institutions catering

for investors. Zone operations will create a high-skilled labor force, technology transfers, and new industries so that ‘developing nations’ turn into ‘newly industrialized countries’ (NICs) and move from low-wage manufacturing to higher value-added production (Doucette and Park 2019; Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1981; Hsu, Gimm, and Glassman 2018; Neveling 2021; Park 2005; Sklair 1986).

The ideological power of that credo has withstood many challenges since the 1940s. Zone workers and trade unions have organized strikes and riots, nationally and internationally. The anti-sweatshop movement of the 1990s and 2000s mobilized consumers across the globe against the labor relations in the zones. Numerous independent researchers and university scholars have pointed out in unison how most regions and nations remain stuck in the sweatshop phase of SEZ manufacturing, how the zones establish gendered super-exploitation with wages insufficient to cover the reproduction costs of workers, and how the zones promote runaway factories that roam the globe’s SEZs in search of ever-new tax breaks, lower wages, and workers without collective bargaining rights. International human rights and workers’ rights organizations have listed how corporations and governments have murdered trade unionists, and how a lack of health and safety checks cause industrial accidents such as the Rana Plaza building collapse, which killed more than a thousand workers in a Bangladesh bonded warehouse zone factory in the 2010s (Asia Monitor Resource Center 1998; Baird and McCaughan 1979; Chisolm et al. 1986; Marhoz and Szymanski 1996; Panimbang 2017).

As the number of zones rises unabatedly, it is paramount to highlight the irrationality and absurdity of the value regimes that ‘native’ ruling classes of the neoliberal world-system front in their pro-SEZ propaganda. Anthropologies of value commonly consider hope and dignity among subalterns across the globe as their fields of study and theorizing (Graeber 2001; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). SEZs instead are fields that first and foremost articulate the hopes and desires of a transnational capitalist class of CEOs of multinational corporations like H&M, Apple, Samsung, and IKEA, including their supporters such as World Bank officials, consultants at PricewaterhouseCoopers, journalists at *The Economist*, orthodox economists, and national governments.

Framing SEZs as frontlines in neoliberalism’s global value regime requires a dialectical and a historical perspective (Kalb, Introduction) that links anthropology’s long-standing empirical focus on ‘plural values’ (people’s preferences and attachments) with Marxian critical political economy analyses of ‘singular’ value (human labor

expended for commodity production and capital accumulation). The aim is thus to show how middle-managers doing the legwork have translated the value regimes of the members of a transnational capitalist class into ideologies and materialities that shape the exploitation of workers in factories, and of national economies that have financed zone establishment and subsidized zone operations since the 1940s. Such an analysis establishes an anthropology of value that acknowledges the reality of many millions of workers and their households toiling away in thousands of zones spread across the vast majority of the world's nation-states, and who are central to the global workings of neoliberal capitalism.

A first step toward realizing this project is to overcome a fundamental mistake at the cradle of economic anthropology, which assumes a substantial difference between the value theories of political economists and the lived values of the subject populations of anthropological research. David Graeber, for example, endorses Bronislaw Malinowski's complaint in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* that the value models of classical economics offered nothing to explain the behavior of the Trobriand islanders (Graeber 2001: 6). From Malinowski to Graeber, mainstream anthropologists have ignored the capitalist world-system's powerful presence in the lives of the subject populations of anthropological research. This ignorance maintains anthropology's Western imperialist Herderian ideology of cultures as genuine, distinct, authentic social structures, which, in the case at hand, pretends that the models and praxis of classical economics—or, in later and contemporary instances, neo-classical and neoliberal economics—had no relevance for the lives and value regimes of the world's 'cultures.'² This is despite detailed research showing how centuries of colonialism and imperialism, slavery and indenture, have violently incorporated the world population into capitalism's value regimes (Meillassoux 1981; Mintz 1985; Wolf [1982] 1997).

How then, can we turn around the colonial and imperialist thrust in anthropology's theoretical repertoire to consider instead the grim political economy of global capitalism and manufacturing in SEZs in postcolonial nations? One viable alternative to anthropology's chimeric of a "social life of things" that captures the impact of things as commodities on social life (Friedman 1991) is Christopher Gregory's insistence on values' quality to "describe and prescribe." Thus, with a nod to Marx and Engels, people are "both subjects and makers of the values that guide human actions and influence human destiny" (Gregory 1997: 5). I now translate these insights into a world-systemic

approach to the frontlines of value, because this is the location where SEZs operate.

In the capitalist world-system, it is clearly the capitalists who own and control the powerful material structures that shape everyday lives. These structures comprise the 'classical' locations of the capitalist world-system's economic base in agriculture, manufacturing industries, resource extraction, transport, and services, but they also, as a rule, capture the 'peak locations' of the world-system's superstructure in international organizations, universities, think tanks, and so on. These locations not only plan, produce, and review the operations of the economic base but they also provide the ontologies and epistemologies—that is, the 'plural values'—for a singular value regime of exploitation in SEZs and elsewhere against oppositional movements that demand decent work and a fair distribution of wealth. The dual control of economic base and superstructure is what enables capitalists to impose their mode of production on others (Neveling 2017c).

In other words, mainstream anthropology's orientalist insistence that there is a realm of plural values outside of capitalism collapses as soon as the discipline's empirical focus shifts toward historical realism along the lines formulated by Gavin Smith and others (Smith 2014). The theoretical base for a frontlines of value analysis of SEZs is the fact that the capitalist world-system combines a singular value regime at its economic base, the sphere of production and exchange, and a plural value regime at its superstructure, while the two are mediated by a sphere of planning, evaluation, and ideological policing. The following section will expand on the analytical details for an anthropology of the frontlines of value in SEZs.

Exploitation Projects and Public Asset-Stripping as Key Ethnographic Aspects

SEZs are costly endeavors, as they require planning, lobbying, legislation, promotion, oversight, policing, and more. As objects and subjects of ethnographic research, SEZs are akin to the "project[s] in the model[s]" that Susana Narotzky discusses with reference to the real-world articulations of exchange practices and their abstraction for comparison in the anthropologists' theoretical model (Narotzky 2007). Expanding on this, it is important to highlight that the 'natives' of our SEZ ethnographies have their own projects to strive for. Whereas a group of Graeberians may come home from an Occupy

protest and, fueled with an imaginary Maussian communitarianism, may say, “let’s have reciprocal exchanges,” those who set up SEZs may have a “native’s point of view” (Neveling 2015a) that says, “let’s create the most profitable environment for investors, and make sure a few rewards end up in our pockets as well.”

Most such utterances come from natives who are middle-managers supporting and executing transnational ruling-class interests and value regimes in the capitalist world-system. Mainstream and anti-Marxist anthropologists have hardly ever considered these middle-managers’ operations. Following the lead of publications like James Ferguson’s *Anti-Politics Machine*, they ignore the power of ruling-class value regimes, and instead attribute superior channeling power to discursive developmentalist regimes. This ignores the agency of developers, promoters, and guardians of the SEZ value regime (Neveling 2017c), and fails to identify who is responsible for investor profits, workers’ poverty, and government bankruptcy. All the while, the centrality of (super-)exploitation of workers as the first core project in the SEZ regime is evident in the cumulative, cross-regional, and transhistorical knowledge from critical ethnographies that have recorded and analyzed racist, orientalist, and sexist discrimination against mainly young women workers in the zones (for the comparison see Neveling 2021; and for examples from zones in Malaysia, Mexico, and elsewhere, see Chisolm et al. 1986; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Yelvington 1995).

The second core project in the SEZ value regime is to convert public wealth into private wealth via tax and customs waivers and other substantial state-subsidies for investors. Across all zones, past and present, governments invest substantial sums in industrial infrastructure. The construction of industrial estates in 1970s Mauritius, funded with World Bank loans shouldered by the state but organized and overseen by a mostly private-sector-controlled Development Bank of Mauritius, is a paradigmatic example. Somewhat unusual was that when the Mauritian state defaulted in the late 1970s, around 18.5 percent of national debt was from World Bank loans for SEZ construction. In many other nations, SEZs have been conditions in World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs *after* default (Neveling 2017c, 2018a). Significant expenses contrast with no income from capital gains tax, corporation taxes, or taxation on capital repatriation; and no income from customs duties on the import and export of raw materials, machinery, and more. Although states seem to believe that investors would be happy to pay such tributes when so-called tax holidays end after five to ten years, most investors

end their operations when these deadlines are approaching. Their unwillingness to reciprocate is written in bold letters all over the history of FDI in SEZs: starting in 1950s Puerto Rico and running all the way through to 2000s Mauritius, too many companies ceased operations a few days before tax holidays expired, some reopening days later under new names with a fresh start on the waiver schemes (Neveling 2015b).

Adding to these indirect subsidies from the non-collection of tributary payments are so-called one-stop-shops that hothouse applications for zone manufacturing through approval stages, and offer marketing at international trade fairs and more. The most extreme cases of public wealth transfers to corporate entities are guaranteed profit margins and direct subsidies per job created, as in the infamous Wisconsin-based Foxconn factory negotiated by former US president, Donald Trump. The local state fronted around \$400 million in expenses for land purchases and industrial infrastructure, and agreed to tax subsidies in exchange for a \$10 billion investment in a 20 million-square-foot manufacturing complex that should have created thirteen thousand jobs. Estimates for direct government subsidies ranged between \$200,000 and \$1 million per job created (against a US average of \$24,000 in subsidies per job created), with the State of Wisconsin only breaking even on revenue generated by that investment in 2043 at the earliest. In 2019, however, Foxconn employed just over two hundred workers and had constructed a fraction of the factory space promised. The project is now buried, and most of the money is gone.³

Labor exploitation and public asset-stripping are the key components of the value regime that attracts investors to the zones. Our next step in developing a paradigm for an ethnography of SEZs as frontlines in neoliberalism's global value regime captures how international organizations, national governments and ministries, and policy advisers and consultants have been designing the zones to deliver these key components since the late 1940s. Moving forward academically means to scale up empirical findings from ethnographic research on SEZs to advance anthropological theories; and in particular, theories on the uneven global class formation of the post-1945 world-system. This conversion task from ethnography to anthropological theory is completed once we combine the value theory of public asset-stripping with earlier theories that see SEZs as triggers for a global shift towards a new international division of labor in which workers in low-wage nations and regions have taken over the jobs from higher-wage nations and regions, commonly with

much harsher labor laws and legislation against collective bargaining and unionization (Dicken 2003; Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1981; Neveling 2015a).

No Islands of History but Markers of Hegemonic Succession in the World-System

SEZs are no islands of history but are firmly embedded in the *longue durée* of racialized capitalist exploitation. As I have argued for the case of spirit possessions in Mauritian garment factories, workers are very aware of the structural continuities of colonial slavery and indenture in the zones. When Mauritian EPZ-workers “saw” ghosts of French colonial soldiers and British merchant mariners roam across shopfloors, they saw them as spirits of neocolonialism haunting the newly independent nation (Neveling 2015c).

On a different scale of global economic engagements, postcolonial nations designed SEZs to diversify their economies from either colonial monocrop agricultural policies or from an overt dependency on extractive industries. Although zones in Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Singapore, Taiwan, and elsewhere delivered on development policy targets, the benefits for workers were limited. Wages only increased with full employment, often based on one-off payments and hardly ever based on substantive, lasting increases to national minimum wages. As Chris Meulbroeck and Majed Akhter have shown for Singapore, and as I have argued for Mauritius, national zone programs with somewhat stronger workers’ rights emerged from labor struggles and the search for legitimacy for new alliances between an economic ruling class of the colonial era and an aspiring political ruling class of the early postcolonial state (Neveling 2017c; Meulbroeck and Akhter 2019). In both instances, the latter alliance had been forged in the late colonial British state, when, as Meulbroeck and Akhter put it poignantly, “weak capitalist hegemony manifested through high wages and consistent struggle over the terms of the labour contract” (Meulbroeck and Akhter 2019: 1254). In Singapore, located in one of the ‘hot’ arenas of the Cold War, foreign expertise from a UNDP mission headed by the Dutch economist Albert Winsemius provided the “ideological currents to the periphery” (Gramsci 1976: 116–17, in Meulbroeck and Akhter 2019: 1255) that allowed the People’s Action Party to push through an export-oriented industrialization policy based on a harsh labor regime in the 1960s. Gradual wage increases in the 1970s paved the way for converting

the city-state into a “command centre for finance, transport and services in the 1980s” (Meulbroek and Akhter 2019: 1258).

The value regimes perspective sheds light on the fact that this trajectory was neither a fundamental shift from Singapore’s earlier position in the global economy prior to the Second World War, nor that it triggered a change in class structures. Whereas mainstream anthropologists like Aiwha Ong have hailed Singapore a success story that proves SEZ development could emerge from the sweatshop phase, the only new emergence at the value regime level is that it became more profitable to convert Jurong Island from a sweatshop hotspot into a logistics and finance center. This analysis stems from a mistaken focus on promotional utterings by the Singapore Economic Development Board’s alleged ‘new strategy’ after the 1997/98 Asian crisis, proclaiming the creation of a new “vibrant and effervescent enterprise ecosystem” within Singapore (Ong 2006: 179), when, in fact, the transition from colonial capitalist regimes of value to neoliberal regimes of value for Singapore was complete with the 1960s shift toward export-oriented industrialization discussed above. Singapore then moved into outsourcing sweatshop manufacturing capital via the government’s ‘regional industrial parks’ program rolled out in 1990 (Pereira 2004). That program subcontracted substantial percentages of Singapore’s production to SEZs in Indonesia and China, thus securing revenues via a territorial expansion of the nation’s grip on the SEZ value regime rather than shifting the nation’s mainstream economic activities. So, rather than an extrication from the sweatshop, Singapore stands for a magnification of the same onto an incomparably enlarged geographic scale, with its key actors reaping the fruits.

Another alleged SEZ success story, the Mauritian EPZ legislation of 1970, triggered a decades-long sweatshop phase with a short full-employment and high-wages peak around 1990, followed immediately by an internationalization of sweatshop production to Madagascar, India, and later Bangladesh. In the 2000s, unemployed ex-SEZ workers were retrained en masse to take up service jobs in tourism, integrated resort schemes, and a so-called ‘cybercity’ for expanding finance and logistics businesses. Again, class structures remained in place while Mauritian corporations successfully diversified and internationalized from colonial sugar-cane production into textiles and garments, tourism, real estate, and financial services.

How do we frame these historical continuities and ruptures from colonial to postcolonial value regimes in SEZ development and operations? Gavin Smith shows that in all ethnographic research

locations, our interlocutors' viewpoints and actions are shaped by contested positions on historical justice and injustice (Smith, G. 2016). In locations with long histories of colonial and imperialist capitalism, people understand their lives as embedded in the world-system's contemporary and historical regimes of value and violence that they and their ancestors have been subjected to (Neveling 2016). They are thus well aware that SEZs escalate the exploitation of working classes by national and transnational capitalist classes. When neoliberal development economists promote SEZs, they offer ideological backing for such exploitation, making zone promotions critical junctions (Kalb and Tak 2005) that reveal the bifurcations of class interests locally, regionally, and globally, and within the ideological shifts from classical-liberal economics to neoclassical-neoliberal economics.

Bifurcating class interests and ideological shifts in the superstructure of the capitalist world-system are the stuff of which new hegemonic consensuses are made. A new hegemonic consensus requires massive transaction costs to create material and immaterial infrastructures that regulate the world-system. Ideological shifts do not happen coincidentally but coincide with changes in the historical fixes of capitalism driven by hegemonic succession—most recently from Dutch to British to US-American supremacy, as identified by Giovanni Arrighi (Arrighi 2004).⁴

The emergence of the first SEZ-type economic development program coincided with the transition from British to US hegemony. Puerto Rico, a US colony, was the testing ground for the first neoliberal manufacturing industrialization program in world history. Elsewhere I have detailed the relevance of the Puerto Rican model for the early Cold War years (Neveling 2015b), for global class formations (Neveling 2015a), and for the emergence of neoliberalism as global praxis (Neveling 2017b). Below, the focus is on the emergence of a particular regime of value within the new geopolitical economy after the Second World War, a defining moment of which was the rapid decolonization of many European and other colonial possessions.

The global movement for decolonization stood at the intersection of resistance against colonial rule and runaway imperialist exploitation, and of an emerging outsourcing of production from the heartlands of imperialist industrial power to colonial and post-colonial regions with much lower reproduction costs for capital. By around 1800, Puerto Rico had lost its strategic importance in the contest over control of the expanding Caribbean economy between Spanish, British, and Dutch interests. When the USA invaded Puerto Rico in 1898, the population was composed of recently liberated

slaves (slavery was abolished in 1873; Dietz 1986: 35), settlers from the Mediterranean, and refugees from the South American wars of liberation. Spain had tried to revive Puerto Rico's economy with tax breaks after 1815, but poverty was rampant throughout the 1800s, including under US rule (Dietz 1986; Toro 1982).

Eric Wolf reminds us of the unevenness of the imperialist stage of capitalist expansion in the 1800s. Lenin argued that the monopolies emerging from competition among capitalists, and their tendency to reduce profit rates because of higher investment in technology, generated a surplus of idle variable capital that had to be exported, thus triggering further colonial expansion and wars among colonizing powers. British imperialism may not have ticked all boxes identified by Lenin (Wolf [1982] 1997: 299–305), but US expansion in Puerto Rico certainly ticked them all. The Foraker Act of 1900 incorporated Puerto Rico into the US economy, with shipping monopolized for US corporations and all trade tariffs controlled by Washington. The US dollar was introduced as the island's currency at an unfavorable conversion rate for locals, so that US investors could buy up large swaths of agricultural land. This wiped out the small Puerto Rican capitalist class, while price conversions for commodities from pesos to the US dollar ramped up inflation (Dietz 1986: 79–93).

Puerto Rico's economy was now dominated by the production of 'stimulants' for the mainland market. Tobacco growing and the production of cigars expanded rapidly under the control and ownership of US corporations. Sugar became the dominant export crop as US corporations turned Puerto Rico into a plantation colony with absentee landowners similar to earlier British colonial economic development policies (Neveling 2013). The decline of some agricultural sectors (notably coffee) and the industrialization of others proletarianized the population. *Colonos* planted and harvested canes for US corporations, while larger plantations and mills employed wage workers. By 1940, the agricultural sector was generating 31 percent of Puerto Rican net income and employed more than 220,000 laborers directly, as well as more than 30,000 in manufacturing industries such as sugar mills and tobacco factories. This was roughly 50 percent of the 514,214 Puerto Ricans in employment (Perloff 1950: 55; García-Colón 2009).

Puerto Rico under US imperialist rule served the expansion of mainland capital, and was part of a rush for political and economic control over territories and infrastructure in the Caribbean. Fast-forwarding Puerto Rico to the political economy of late nineteenth-century Western imperialism generated mass emigration

of agricultural workers to Cuba and Hawaii, and for industrial labor to the US East Coast and to Chicago. On the pretext of limiting emigration and impoverishment, the local ruling party leader, Luis Muñoz Marín, and the lead technocrat of the Puerto Rican Industrial Development Corporation (PRIDCo) abandoned the 1948 electoral mandate for independence from the USA to instead establish an alliance with anti-New Deal mainland politicians like Senator Robert A. Taft. Taft was co-author of the anti-union Taft–Hartley Act of 1947 that overruled most of the (limited) democratic achievements of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. In a much more radical move against New Deal policies, PRIDCo auctioned off local government-owned factories for import-substitution production of basic commodities like shoes and glass bottles. It also turned Puerto Rico into a testing ground for early neoliberal manufacturing globalization (Caban 1989; Bel 2011; Berman Santana 1998; Neveling 2015b), with legislation in 1948 that allowed for tax- and customs-free manufacturing, massive local government spending on industrial infrastructure, and government-backed loans for investors. Working in concert with the Boston-based consulting corporation Arthur D. Little, PRIDCo first attracted factory relocations from the US northeast textile and garment sector. New jobs in Puerto Rico meant job losses and early forms of structural unemployment in the US, often in trade union strongholds (Chomsky 2008). For corporations like Textron Inc. (owned by Royal W. Little, nephew of Arthur D. Little) and the Hilton Hotels Corporation, relocations to Puerto Rico were a stepping stone toward multinational activities in the Philippines and elsewhere (Neveling 2017a).

The rapidly changing landscape of industrial manufacturing in both the US northeast and in Puerto Rico gave birth to a crucial persona of neoliberal value regimes: the heroic entrepreneur engaged with a heavy heart in Schumpeterian creative destruction, who sacks thousands of workers and deindustrializes entire regions as they shift production to developing regions where they are celebrated as an economic leviathan bringing mass employment and industrial futures. Meanwhile, the fact that tax breaks and government money pay for the new factories and industries, and that workers are declared undeserving and thus only worthy of the lowest wages, is conveniently forgotten (Neveling 2015b).

The value regime established in the Puerto Rican prototype program for today's SEZs not only relied on this polarized conception of social value and worth, but also on a calculus for its operations at base level. The US Treasury offered an accounting model that por-

trayed direct investment from the mainland, incorporation into the US-dollar currency zone, and trade with the mainland as economic imperatives for the survival of the island's population. This insistence on a Ricardian comparative advantage for the satellite from trade with the metropole became an important counterpoint against the increasing popularity of dependency theory in developing countries. Whereas dependency theory showed that imperialism's terms of trade based on the extraction and processing of cheap resources from colonies had benefited only the metropolises (Toye and Toye 2003), SEZs introduced the chimera that export-oriented industrialization backed by state-subsidies for foreign investors, lax labor legislation, and low wages could be a viable postcolonial alternative.

Backed by contracts from the Truman administration and their successors, the Puerto Rican SEZ model went viral in the 1950s. Arthur D. Little provided aggressive marketing for this antidote to import-substitution policies in Jamaica, Egypt, Mexico, and Chile, while the policies were tailored for the requirements of each nation ready to roll out a zone-program. India, Singapore, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Cyprus, Malta, Mauritius, Indonesia, and many other nations had zones planned or operational when Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye developed their pathbreaking international division of labor thesis based on the relocations of manufacturing from Western industrial heartlands to newly industrializing nations in the late 1970s (Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1981; Neveling 2017b).

In Puerto Rico, rapid economic growth stopped around 1957. Five hundred new factory openings had created no more than 32,000 jobs; not enough to halt the emigration of impoverished peasants and landless laborers to major US cities. The fate of New York's Puerto Ricans was packaged into neat, racist stereotypes as "macho teenage gangsters and hysterical lovers" in Leonard Bernstein's 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*,⁵ when in fact Puerto Rican migrants took up work in US light-industrial manufacturing in direct competition with factories in Puerto Rico and other early SEZs (Chomsky 2008; Whalen 2002). This praxis of pitting low-paid migrant workers on the mainland against their fellow citizens in the zone underlines how SEZs created new options for keeping wages and workers' rights down in manufacturing locations around the world.

Returning to Gavin Smith's writings on the historicity of field sites and actors, the neoliberal value regimes created by SEZs are powerful levers in the hands of ruling classes—both on the nation-state and the global scale—to expand the lifetime of the capitalist world-system in the face of anti-systemic movements. For emerging

comprador bourgeoisies in postcolonial nations like Singapore and Mauritius, zone legislation and operations opened up a pathway to quash working class expectations for a more just division of wealth after successful anticolonial struggles that had culminated in national independence. For comprador bourgeoisies in Puerto Rico, early zone policies opened up pathways for alliances with right-wing political networks that supported the “businessmen’s crusade against the New Deal,” studied in detail by historian Kim Phillips-Fein (Phillips-Fein 2009).

On the global scale, SEZs were powerful levers for sustaining and increasing capital’s surplus value from industrial manufacturing and later also from financial services and other sectors. Karl Marx’s analysis of capitalist surplus value identified extending the working day at static wages and increasing worker productivity via advanced technology, also at static wages, as two forms of surplus value increase. SEZs, however, establish a ‘global labor arbitrage’ (GLA) for multinational capital, which uses relocations to low-wage nations and regions with lower production costs, for subsequent exports to high-wage and high-consumer nations and regions. Capital here feeds on global wage differentials (Smith, J. 2016: 236–40), as happened at the turn of the twentieth century in European regional markets, where flexible wage dumping and the gendered exploitation of local working classes in Eindhoven and elsewhere, combined with free market policies, helped to create a multinational corporation in consumer products such as Philips, as described by Don Kalb (1997).

Unequal Exchanges: SEZs as Weapons of the Strong

Based on the above, we can conclude that unequal exchange in the early decades of contemporary SEZs formation, from the 1940s to the 1970s, had the opposite effect of what is commonly claimed as the backbone of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century imperialism. Rather than nurturing a compromised labor aristocracy in the core regions of the world-system and pitting them against super-exploited workers in the peripheries (Smith, J. 2016), SEZs create a dialectical, global assemblage of structural unemployment and super-exploitation in core regions *and* in peripheries. As I have argued elsewhere for the period of the Cold War and decolonization (Neveling 2015b), zones were (and continue to be) weapons of the strong in the battle against socialism, nonalignment, and declining rates of profit in the Western capitalist heartlands. Because early

SEZs in Puerto Rico, India (since 1965), Mexico (since 1965), Taiwan (since 1965), Singapore (since 1966), Mauritius (since 1970), South Korea (since 1971), and elsewhere had governments covering substantial shares of manufacturing capital's reproduction costs, they liberated capital from spatiotemporal fixes that kept manufacturing tied in space until significant up-front, fixed capital investment in factories, infrastructure, and more had been recovered. SEZs were neither a product of the flexible accumulation that David Harvey says kicked in from the late 1960s, nor a response to the stagflation crisis of the 1970s (Harvey 1990: 141–72). Instead, the zones were laboratories for flexible accumulation and relocations to such zones contributed to 1970s stagflation. Therefore, the 1970s were a “decade of consolidation” (Neveling 2017b) of export-oriented neoliberal manufacturing rather than a decade of rupture toward neoliberalism.

Table 1.1 highlights the next major step in the global spread of SEZs. The opening of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to foreign manufacturing and other investment in the late 1970s cannot be attributed to the Volcker Shock but to the death of Mao and the rise of Deng Xiaoping to power in the Communist Party. As in all

Table 1.1. The global spread of EPZs/SEZs since 1975

Year	1975	1978	1984	1986	1997	2002	2006
Number of countries with EPZs	25	28	35	47	93	116	130
Number of EPZs	79	N/A	N/A	176	845	3,000	3,500
Employment (millions)	0.725	0.694	0.837	1.97	22.5	43	66
—of which, PR China	—	—	0.015	0.07	18	30	40
—of which, other countries (for which figures available)	0.725	0.694	0.822	1.9	4.5	13	26
Share of PR China (percent)	0	0	1.79	3.55	80	69.77	60.60

Source: Neveling (2020)

other national case studies broached above, the PRC zones were no independent inventions but modeled on existing zones; and they absorbed substantial government resources. Construction works in Shenzhen were supported by infrastructure units from the army and by pooling capital from other PRC regional administrations. Hong Kong capitalists failed to deliver on investment promises in the early 1980s, so that SEZs created major foreign currency reserves problems for the PRC government (Crane 1990; Du 2020; Zhou 2021). World-market opening via SEZs facilitated the PRC's full membership of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1980, and the many bilateral trade agreements required to gain membership of the World Trade Organization in the early 2000s. Without such agreements, the PRC's rise to world leadership in industrial manufacturing in the 2000s would not have been possible. As in other zones, world-market access and manufacturing industrialization has caused severe hardships for workers (for a leading study, see Ngai 2005).

In other crucial developments since the 1970s, management scholars like Peter Drucker pushed for the development of SEZs as industrial clusters to unite factories and research departments in related sectors. This was despite the fact that, from a 'frontlines of value' perspective, industrial districts and clusters bear risks for capital. Because the vertical and horizontal integration of industries in one location may lead to wage increases, new SEZ pressure groups like the World Export Processing Zones Association proposed the amended concept "production sharing" (Bolin 1988). First proposed as a marketing trope in defending the outsourcing and relocation of US manufacturing to Mexican zones against 1970s protests from US trade unions, such cross-border production sharing capitalizes on the wage differentials across national and regional labor markets while it reinserts a somewhat vulgar Ricardian comparative advantage ideology into zone promotions. Recent World Bank publications laud PRC-SEZs for their organization as industrial clusters (Zeng 2010). A contemporary push for yet more SEZs from so-called new structural economics (Stiglitz, Lin, and Patel 2013; Lin 2014) fuses Alfred Marshall's theory of industrial districts as cross-sector incubators for economic growth with a neo-Ricardian framing of national "resource endowments" such as low labor costs and particular skill sets (Neveling 2020).

Besides investments in fixed capital (conveniently covered by national governments in SEZs) and expenses for the reproduction of labor (conveniently diminished by global labor arbitrage in SEZs), reproduction costs for manufacturing industries include trans-

port costs when commodity chains globalize. The consolidation of containerization in the late 1970s pushed costs down significantly (Khalili 2020). Industrial relocations were thus only limited to light-manufacturing industries for the first decades of SEZ operations. If SEZs secured the mobility of capital via government subsidies, low wages, and, increasingly, so-called development aid from Western nations and from international organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank, then logistics and other sectors followed suit after the Volcker Shocks and the debt crises in the second and third world in the 1980s and 1990s in order to oil the “geographical seesaw” of capitalism as it descended toward new manufacturing locations in postcolonial capitalist nations (Smith, N. 2010).

Although material and immaterial infrastructures may be regarded as past labor, they continue to generate profits that do not depreciate as the capital value of factory buildings and machinery do. This is because they are vital links to international trade routes and trading systems. They also create immaterial infrastructures—institutions that market the zones to investors and provide the latter with institutional support for their operations. Once up and running, “successful” zones generate surplus capital via both trade and manufacturing. Imports of raw materials and components are assembled in SEZ production units and then exported as semi-finished and finished commodities to foreign markets. The zones are thus transnationally integrated material and immaterial infrastructures with value regimes that shape the lives of local and regional, sometimes national, populations as they incorporate millions directly into the global circuits of capital, its supply chains, its just-in-time production regimes, and its boom-and-bust cycles, while putting pressure on the lives of others outside the zones.

SEZs on the Shopfloor: Gendered (Super-)Exploitation

Early SEZs were testing grounds and forerunners for the spread of neoliberal value regimes on a planetary scale. For a deeper understanding of that value regime’s impact on workers and livelihoods, it is important to return to the above discussion of ‘global labor arbitrage’ as a third means for capitalists to increase surplus value (beyond the extension of working hours at stagnant wages or the introduction of new production technologies). The historicity of SEZs singular value regime is crucial here; and to understand that again requires us to abandon mainstream anthropology’s imagination of

zones as abstract behemoths that are in distinct clashes with 'local' cultures untouched by previous eras of global capitalism. Instead, SEZs are extending earlier plantation regimes, with their slavery and indenture, toward zone factories with free wage labor predominantly recruited on the basis of gendered exploitation. Governments and international development organizations are already accounting for lower wages for young women at the zone planning stage. World Bank reporting on the prospects of EPZ development in Mauritius, for example, compared wages of young Mauritian women with wages that young women earned in Hong Kong in the 1970s in order to assess competitiveness (Neveling 2017c).

Spanning decades as well as continents, SEZ models of gendered exploitation thus have long histories in capitalist value regimes in metropolises and in peripheries alike. Critical, Marxist anthropologists have detailed how the early internationalization of capitalist corporations forcefully incorporated domestic economies into the realm of capitalism's social reproduction by way of super-exploitative remunerations for workers that require subsidies from their households and sometimes wider networks (Meillassoux 1981; Nash 1979; Robinson 1986). Starting in 1940s Puerto Rico, SEZs capitalized on existing dependencies of households and populations on work market integration. Textiles, garments, electronics, and other manufacturers in Puerto Rico led the way globally with regard to both anti-workers' rights policies and gendered exploitation. An official study by the National Planning Association, reviewing the first ten years of operations, highlights that by 31 August 1957 only 71 of 534 new plants were unionized. Twenty-five further petitions had been rejected and twenty petitions had been amended by the National Labor Relations Board (Stead 1958: 68–69). US-mainland unions dominated the scene and duly served the interests of capital, which was manifest, for example, when the president of the International Lady Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) successfully protested against Puerto Rican legislature plans to increase the minimum wage in the brasserie industry on the grounds that this would reduce competitiveness. Instead, the ILGWU co-funded low-cost housing in San Juan in collaboration with the Rockefeller Foundation. Puerto Rican data here foreshadow a global strategy of US-mainland trade union transnationalization affiliated with US corporate capital and Cold War anti-workers' rights policies by various branches of the CIA-infiltrated AFL-CIO (Scipes 2010).

Puerto Rican female workers had been incorporated into the circuits of long-distance manufacturing since the subcontracting of

needlework by US warehouses in the 1920s. Garment manufacturing and embroidery expanded significantly in the 1930s, with unregulated factories opening in larger cities. From 1947, factories benefiting from the SEZ-style incentives (detailed above) absorbed many of these female workers. Wages increased until the 1957 turning point toward runaway capital. At that time, women's median weekly wages in manufacturing was US\$17.10, only 66 percent of men's wages. This was insufficient to reproduce women's labor power and feed their families. Wages for home needlework stagnated at US\$3.30 in the same period (Jaffe 1959: 129–30). Puerto Rico's so-called second phase of industrialization targeted higher wage industries, but again mainly fed on tax exemptions and wage differentials with the mainland. Food stamps programs became a widespread remedy against malnutrition in the 1970s, and informal economic activities akin to 1930s garment manufacturing in unregulated smaller factories, and needlework subcontracting to households, returned in the 1980s (Safa 1995: 14–17).

Puerto Rico was yet again a frontline that established the zones' value regimes that incorporate the everyday lives of zone workers into the circuits of capital. Personal as much as societal preferences and attachments, the plural values of working classes, are affected when regions undergo rapid industrialization. Along the Mexico–US border, as in Puerto Rico, gender roles and gendered exploitation were redefined when an SEZ-style border industrialization program attracted apparel and electronics manufacturers in 1965, and promoted Mexican women as diligent and docile sweatshop workers to foreign and national investors. SEZ factories became infamous 'maquilas,' depicted in labor rights reports and later even in Hollywood movies for the hardship of women workers subject to systematic sexism, and hoping to earn enough money to pay a coyote to get across the Mexico–US border, making the zones known worldwide as treadmills of exploitation that eat through rural migrants from Mexico and other Central American nations (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Heyman 1991; Wright 2006).

Nepal's SEZs came and went in a rapid boom–bust cycle. To uphold factory labor regimes, managers in the process of translating the value regimes of transnational capitalists formed alliances with religious and reactionary networks, seeking to enforce worldviews from a fictional past (Shakya 2007; Ishii 2017) into real-world power on shopfloors. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and any other religion are suitable tools in the hands of factory managers globally to enforce the toil of piece-rate-driven assembly line manufacturing

in overheated and unsafe workplaces (Kalb 1997; Neveling 2015c). In the case of Shenzhen, and those few other instances where zones have come to define entire regions or large cities, SEZ operations shape the development of housing and neighborhoods, daily and weekly routines, rhythms of cities, their local and international markets, and more (Liang 1999; Zhou 2021).

Gendered exploitation in SEZs continued despite a radical shift in the organization of global manufacturing. Before the 1990s, nation-states competed over manufacturing relocations from multinational corporations that would commonly set up zone factories under their own brand. This created an opening for trade unions and workers' rights movements to identify working conditions and labor relations in the zones, and link them with leading Western high street brands. The sportswear brand Nike, for example, became synonymous with workers' exploitation in zone factories in the 1990s, and was a major target of the anti-sweatshop movement whose aims and politics were summarized in Naomi Klein's bestseller *No Logo* (Klein 2000). Researchers and journalists were now keen to uncover the production chain of a given high street consumer item. Books and articles retraced the production steps of T-shirts, mobile phones, and other popular consumer items across the globe, and mostly found SEZs along the chains (Rivoli 2009). As in the case of the 1960s and 1970s non-alignment movement, whose demands for a new and fairer international economic order were replaced with the fiction of successful capitalist development as 'emerging markets' in a new international division of labor, capital had an alternative ready to answer the anti-sweatshop movement's campaigns. Production had already been outsourced and subcontracted to local producers since the 1970s (Neveling 2017b). Now, this praxis became a global standard, with former manufacturers turning into brands with high-street presence across the Western world and beyond, selling products that carried their labels even though they were manufactured by other corporations. This shift in the organization of global consumer manufacturing made the 1990s and 2000s the decades when new global corporate players, mainly from East Asian nations, entered the zones; the Taiwan-based Hon Hai Precision Industry Co. Ltd (trading as Foxconn Technology Group, known as Foxconn) and the South Korean Samsung Group took major shares of the light-consumer electronics component production, for example. In the 2000s, Samsung turned from supplier into a brand itself. Scholars sought to capture this new organizational feature of the global division of labor with the concepts of global value chain (GVC) and global production network (GPN).

The SEZ Value Regime in Sum

Eric Wolf's late oeuvre shows that those plural values studied by anthropologists derive from ideas and ideologies operating on different scales of power. Power articulates at personal, interpersonal, and structural levels. The global political economy is the one that shapes individual lives most profoundly and with the greatest longevity (Wolf 1999). Adding Giovanni Arrighi's work to Wolf's theory of power sheds light on the particular hegemonic subsystem of the capitalist mode of production that shapes this political economy in a *longue durée*; Arrighi calls the succession of these subsystems the historical fixes of the world-system (Arrighi 2004).

In conjunction, these two positions make it clear that singular value formation has been paramount for an analysis of SEZs as frontlines of the capitalist world-system's neoliberal imperialist phase since 1945. After the Second World War, new economic policies and a paradigmatic overhaul of the relations between state, capital, and labor ushered in a prototype SEZ in the US dependency Puerto Rico, and advanced the deindustrialization of New England. As the zones have a pioneer-status in the postcolonial globalization of industrial manufacturing, Puerto Rico was the birthplace of neoliberalism as a political-economic praxis (Neveling 2017b). During the Cold War, the zones served as beacons of capitalism within a temporarily bifurcated world-system. Initially backed by US foreign policy, Western late colonial powers, and, paradoxically, international organizations linked to the nonaligned movement—besides UNCTAD, this is the United Nations Industrial Development Organization—the zones facilitated manufacturing relocations that quashed unionized labor in core regions of the post-1945 world-system, and they heralded the possibility of export-oriented development under capitalism based on gender exploitation for newly independent nations.

With the zones spreading across capitalist developing nations from the 1950s to the 1970s, zone operations became standardized with tax and customs waivers, infringements on workers' rights, and reduced controls on capital movements. Importantly, this period also marks the onset of postcolonial nations taking out high-value loans in hard currencies (USD and others) to develop industrial infrastructure for EPZs—debts that came home to roost during the 1970s crises (for Mauritius as a case study, see Neveling 2014b, 2018b). As the zones consolidated during these crises in the 1970s, sociologists identified them as harbingers of a new global division of labor (Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1981), and anthropologists soon followed suit

with case studies on this paradigm (Nash and Fernández-Kelly 1983). Starting in the 1980s, critical anthropologists have detailed how zone factories consume the productive and reproductive labor of local and domestic economies as workers' wages are too low to reproduce their labor power and rear their offspring (Heyman 1991; Safa 1981, 1995; Yelvington 1995). Up to the 1990s, the zones and their different iterations as EPZs, foreign trade zones (FTZs), free zones (FZs), and so on, shaped the global economy in favor of capital and against workers during the Cold War and in the decades of decolonization (Neveling 2015b).

Gendered (super-)exploitation is not the only game in SEZ-town. Central to the SEZ value regime is the provision of public assets via zone planning, construction, operations, and further subsidies for the benefit of investors. Importantly, this is often funded via public or sovereign debt. A few nations, Mauritius for example, defaulted on sovereign debts because of the costs of SEZs, while other nations were forced to open SEZs as part of IMF-led structural adjustment packages after sovereign default caused by debts from the dual oil shocks and the world food crisis of the 1970s, as well as the global interest rate hikes that pulled investment capital into the United States during the first years of the Reagan administration (the so-called Volcker shock). The proliferation of SEZs was thus part and parcel of a global cluster of crises that culminated in the collapse of the socialist bloc after 1989, when, again, in another round, more national economies were forced to establish SEZs. Elsewhere I have identified SEZs as a capitalist antidote against third world import substitution policies, the nonaligned movement's calls for a new international economic order, and the strong socialist nations and movements of the 1960s (Neveling 2015a, 2015d). The SEZ model thus established a value regime that was central to the shift from national political-economic policies that subsidized the social reproduction of national working classes to a model that directly subsidized investment capital's exploitation of working classes (and foremost female workers) in postcolonial and postsocialist nations. This requires us to consider capitalism as a world-systemic political economy rather than the sum of variegated national political economies in our analysis of neoliberalism's value regime. Changes in the world-system, as pointed out in the opening paragraph to this conclusion and elsewhere in this chapter, are complex and gradual.

A sophisticated anthropology of value regimes in SEZs therefore considers how the regime of surplus of a transnational capitalist class is translated into the realms of national and individual zone poli-

cies. Central in this process are the collaborations between national or regional ruling classes and the middle-managers of the transnational ruling class in the US-centric post-1945 neoliberal world-system. In order to capture these processes, the scale of analysis is the *longue durée* of value regimes, rooted in the colonial and imperialist expansion of capitalism that encapsulates and subsumes different ideological realms such as religion, customs, myths and mythopraxis, sexism and gendered exploitation of labor, and more within the exchange relations prevailing in SEZ labor relations. As historically and geographically situated real-world repercussions of the economic modeling that guides a particular modality of capitalist exploitation, SEZs are reminders that capitalists always act violently in structural terms, and exploitatively in relational terms. An anthropology willing to understand the value regimes informing the establishment and expansion of SEZs in the world-system is wary of the common liberal misrepresentations of violence and exploitation as exemptions to capitalism. Instead, it researches and analyses the omnipresence of capitalism's past and present modeling of exchanges (Narotzky 2007), the conflicts and resolutions among actors over those models in a given field (Smith, G. 2014), and abandons the discipline's grounding in capitalism's ideological tropes of cultural difference (Kalb 1997, and Introduction; Wolf 1982). Seen through these lenses, a historical anthropology of SEZ value regimes reminds us of the untimely coincidences and structured contingencies of capital accumulation (for these concepts, see Kalb 1997, 2015; Neveling 2014a; Wolf 1982). Against the claim of neoliberal development economists and international organizations' publications such as the WIR and the WDR—mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, that advertise global value chains as drivers of global wealth and prosperity—the historical social anthropology of the global spread and operations of SEZs in this chapter shows that the opposite is true; such zones are key drivers of global poverty and escalating inequality on a planetary scale.

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Notes

1. There are also ethnographies of SEZs that fail to criticize their relevance for maintaining capitalism (for details, see Neveling 2014b, 2020). This chapter ignores such studies.
2. A different line of attack on the relativist position in economic anthropology argues that the 1970s and 1980s focus on consumption as the realm of (symbolic) value creation that reifies "the hegemonic, neoclassical consensus," which ignores the importance of use value in production, and especially so in "the evaluative, socio-cultural process we know as the world market" (Hornborg 1992, 4).
3. https://www.theverge.com/21507966/foxconn-empty-factories-wisconsin-jobs-loophole-trump?fbclid=IwAR1uaE3eghAv2ZeY9Ho3p4Xn40K9BrT77wlNz9OIj_M5T7O-dlfELp cX8Uc (date last accessed 10 August 2021).
4. There is a case to be made in another publication that interprets the increasing number of SEZs linked to the People's Republic of China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative as a similarly costly push for another hegemonic shift towards a new historical fix of capitalism.
5. This is from *New York Times* commentary on a recent revamp of the musical; see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/24/opinion/west-side-story-broadway.html> (last accessed 30 March 2021).

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– Chapter 2 –

ON DIFFERENCE AND DEVALUATION IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

Notes on Exploitation in a Myanmar Squatter Settlement

Stephen Campbell



Introduction

Anthropology as a discipline remains haunted by the dichotomy of identity and difference. We see this in anthropological engagements with the so-called informal economy. But here, anthropology is not alone. For with such dichotomous thinking, the discipline echoes dominant economic analysis, albeit in the language of critique.

Consider the literature on the restructuring of labor since the late twentieth century—a political economic transformation that has been variously labeled neoliberalization, flexibilization, deindustrialization, and the like. The analytical emphasis has been on a shift away from normative forms of capitalist wage labor—commonly understood as the Standard Employment Relationship—and a proliferation of precarious, nonstandard forms of labor that are often outside of legal regulation (Breman et. al. 2019; Standing 2011). To be sure, such nonstandard labor arrangements have long been prevalent across the colonial and postcolonial world (Millar 2014; Munck 2013). And within the Global North, women, migrants, and many racialized minorities have often been excluded from full access to ‘standard’ conditions of legally protected employment (Vosko 2009: 1). Nevertheless, ‘modernity’—understood as the mass incorporation of populations into full-time, waged employment with rights and benefits as proscribed by law—is no longer what is expected across

much of the world (Ferguson 1999). Even so, normative claims about ‘standard’ employment continue to operate ideologically in legitimating the exclusion of marginalized populations from an increasingly narrow liberal labor–capital compact (Barchiesi 2011).

It is in this global political-economic context that anthropologists have investigated various forms of nonstandard labor, which are typically not covered by existing labor protection laws. And it is here, I suggest, that anthropologists have fallen back on a classical bifurcation in terms of identity and difference. For in critiquing the flat universalism of dominant economic theory, wherein ‘free’ wage labor is privileged as axiomatic of capitalist modernity, anthropologists have pursued what Marshal Sahlins (2013) celebrates as anthropology’s proper disciplinary focus: alterity—the state of being other (see Bessire and Bond 2014: 440). Anna Tsing (2015: 66) thus identifies as noncapitalist the unwaged labor of mushroom collectors who scavenge in the forests of the northwestern United States. Brenda Chalfin (2019: 505), meanwhile, sees as a surplus population—a population whose labor is surplus to capital—informal waste collectors who labor on rubbish dumps near the Ghanian city of Ashaiman. And James Ferguson (2015: 23, 90) tells us that residents of urban slums in sub-Saharan Africa, whose labor remains unwaged, are uninvolved in systems of capitalist production.

The irony is that, by identifying such nonstandard forms of labor as outside of capitalist production, these anthropological critiques of dominant economic theorizing converge with liberal-historical narratives that have erased the constitutive role of slavery and colonial plunder in the making of Euro-American capitalist modernity. The constitutive importance of plantation slavery in this respect was central to Sidney Mintz’s (1985) historical anthropology of sugar in the making of the modern world. Lisa Lowe (2015) has similarly traced the significance of New World slavery and ‘unfree’ indentured labor in the historical making of European liberalism. However, as Lowe points out, this constitutive role of African slavery and Asian indentured servitude has consistently been erased in sanitized liberal narratives that delimit European capitalist modernity as having wholly endogenous origins. Such historical erasures illustrate what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) condemned as ‘silencing the past’ in dominant Euro-American historical narratives. What is more, such liberal historiographic conventions mirror the inverse anthropological practice of ignoring the constitutive effects of colonial rule when studying colonized peoples as though they were bounded, ahistorical ethnic groups—a practice within British social anthropology that Talal Asad

(1973) incisively critiqued in his classic volume, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (see also Wolf 1982). As for the present, even celebratory accounts of ‘entrepreneurial’ informality have conceptualized the latter as distinct from, rather than constitutive of, the ‘modern market economy’ (De Soto 1986). The effect of thus construing difference as ontological (instead of relational) has been to sanitize liberal capitalist modernity by erasing its mutually constitutive relationship to an often illiberally subordinated other.

In the present chapter, I argue that ethnographic engagement with so-called informal labor offers an important means of challenging the simplistic dichotomy highlighted above—a dichotomy that has influenced both liberal and Marxist conceptions of capitalism. To this end, I consider below several earlier anthropological debates regarding (monistic) identity and (dualistic) difference. I then turn to my own ethnographic research on heterogeneous forms of labor, focusing mostly on a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar’s former capital, but with additional examples drawn from my earlier research among Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand. My aim in presenting this research is to illustrate the persistence of capitalist relations in certain ‘non-normative’ labor arrangements, and the ideological devaluation of such labor, which facilitates the exclusion of affected populations from union organizing drives and labor protection legislation, leading thereby to the suppression of their wages, or equivalents thereof. Yet all the while, such nonstandard labor arrangements remain important sites of surplus value extraction, ‘vertically integrated’ into capitalist supply chains. In short, the informal economy may be nonidentical with axiomatic forms of capitalist modernity, but this does not render it wholly exterior to, wholly other than, contemporary capitalist production. It is instead a frontline of value in the ongoing march of capital accumulation upon an uneven political-economic terrain.

Neither a Flat Universalism nor a Fetishism of Difference

Offering important critiques of modernization theory’s universalizing hubris, anthropologists have intervened to highlight enduring forms of labor seemingly ‘other’ to capitalist modernity. Such is the case in Anna Tsing’s (2015: 66) optimistic reading of mushroom foraging in the forests of northwestern United States—a form of non-capitalist labor, she argues, that has sprouted up amid the interstitial ruins of capitalism. For despite its incorporation into capitalist enter-



Figure 2.1. Yangon industrial slum. © Stephen Campbell

prises by way of global supply chains, such labor, Tsing (*ibid.*: 296, n.4) argues, operates ‘outside capitalist logics.’ More pessimistically, James Ferguson (2015: 23) points to the bric-à-brac of informal livelihoods pursued by indigent residents of urban slums in sub-Saharan Africa—livelihoods he sees as ‘functionally isolated’ (*ibid.*: 11) from capitalist production. What analytically unifies such positions has been an appeal to J.K. Gibson-Graham’s (2006: xiii, xxiv, 35) claim that labor outside of free waged employment is noncapitalist by definition, as well as autonomous of capitalist logics. This is a conceptual position that Gibson-Graham (2014) ground in the ontological arguments of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Pertinent to my argument here, the latter were notoriously averse to dialectical analysis (see Campbell 2019a). The result, therefore, of conceiving nonstandard labor ontologically has been a fetishism of difference—fetishism in the sense of abstracting such labor from the constitutive capitalist relations in which it is embedded.

What is notable here is the extent to which current anthropological theorizing of ontological difference echoes a long lineage of dichotomous thinking in the discipline. The roots of such thinking go back to condescending constructions of the ‘savage’ as an ‘other’ to European capitalist modernity. But such was also the gist

of Malinowski's (1922) sympathetic portrayal of Trobriand *kula* exchange as a culturally particularist challenge to British neoclassical economists who aspired to ground *homo economicus* in an ostensibly universal human nature. Opposing perspectives on the matter hardened when Karl Polanyi (1957) took up Malinowski's arguments to inaugurate what came to be known as the formalist-substantivist debate. Never in fact resolved, the debate simply petered out, with most participants missing "possibilities for pragmatic compromise between polar positions," as Chris Hann and Keith Hart (2011: 71) observe. Such dichotomizing persists in the present where anthropologists have construed moral economy, not as political economy's cultural/ideological dimension, but as a spatially distinct logic—the household as opposed to the market, for example (Gregory 1997; see also Kalb in the Introduction to this volume). A last notable instance of dichotomous thinking erupted in the acerbic debate between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere on the matters of rationality and cultural difference. In Victor Li's (2001) distillation of this dispute, "Obeyesekere sees the possibility of a dialectical relation between a common human nature and cultural variation" (216), whereas Sahlins "abandons dialectics for binary contrasts" (248).

As a dialectical tradition, Marxism should have been able to offer a nuanced engagement with such questions of difference. Unfortunately, the weakest responses have been the most prominent. Such was the case with Vivek Chibber's (2013) wooden critique of postcolonial theory, wherein Chibber was unable to see accounts of colonial difference as anything but a post-structuralist attack on "the universalizing categories of Enlightenment thought" (285)—categories Chibber deems crucial to any Marxian project. For Chibber, then, capitalism is universalizing in its spread of waged employment, while difference, insofar as it persists, is only ever a precapitalist holdout, and in a way tragic, as such "antediluvian forms of social domination" (15) will inevitably succumb to the "universalizing mission" of capital. And so, here as well, free wage labor is privileged as axiomatic of capitalist modernity, while capitalism is construed as identical with its axiomatic forms. What is remarkable is that Chibber, in advocating this flat universalism, seems unaware of the extensive literature on uneven and combined development (Trotsky 1930), world-systems theory, Gramsci's "southern question," formal subsumption (Harootunian 2015: 62–72), and "variegated capitalism" (Peck and Theodore 2007), the authors of which have effectively foregrounded the constitutive heterogeneity of capitalism from an explicitly Marxist perspective. In place of such dialectical

analysis, Chibber offers instead a ‘Marxism’ qua positivist sociology that, in Chris Taylor’s (2013) apt summation, “reduces particularity to an accident, a contingency, or something to strip away so that the pure body of universality might appear.”

Stated otherwise, whereas ontological readings of difference posit nonstandard labor arrangements as noncapitalist, claims to an a priori universal untainted by difference have hypostatized capitalism as the expression of a pure logic unmediated by the particular. Both perspectives fail to account for the constitutive heterogeneity of capitalism in its actually existing forms. Missing here is a dialectical anthropology of labor and class that attends to nonstandard labor arrangements, not as ontologically other to capitalism, nor as a soon to be extinct precapitalist relic, but as integral to the variegated capitalism of the present (Carrier and Kalb 2015; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Kasmir and Gill 2018; Kasmir and Gill 2022). What is needed, in short, is a critique of liberal assertions that ‘free’ wage labor and ‘standard’ employment are axiomatic of capitalism in general. Here I follow Theodore Adorno (1993: 39), who advocated as much in his lectures on Hegel: “Hegelian philosophy rests upon the idea that every individual concept is false, or that there is no actual identity between any finite concept and what it is meant to designate. It does indeed designate it, but in being imposed on the heterogeneous by the subject it also always differs from what the thing is in its own right.” Understood thus, nonstandard arrangements of capitalist labor endure without acknowledgment within axiomatic conceptions of capitalist modernity. Yet, these two dimensions of capitalism—as miserly concept and polyphonic object—nonetheless remain in a relation of mutual constitution.

Rejecting, therefore, a flat universalism, I foreground herein nonstandard labor arrangements as nonidentical with axiomatic forms of capitalist modernity. But rejecting, as well, the fetishism of difference, I attend to the capitalist character of such nonstandard labor so as to contest the assertion that capitalist labor is coterminous with its ostensibly axiomatic forms. This is imminent critique, as I understand it. And it is a critique of this sort that I advance in the remainder of this text through a consideration of present-day Myanmar.

The Erasure of Value and the Devaluation of Labor

When Myanmar’s ruling junta announced it would hold multiparty national elections in November of 2010, after nearly fifty years of



Figure 2.2. Yangon industrial slum. © Stephen Campbell

direct military rule, domestic and international observers were by and large incredulous. However, the subsequent transfer of (circumscribed) executive power to a quasi-civilian government in March 2011, an amnesty of political prisoners, a relaxation of media censorship, and the promulgation of new labor protection laws, tempered widespread misgivings. And with the ensuing removal of international trade sanctions, observers at home and abroad began to speak with credulity of the country's 'transition' to a liberal capitalist order. The World Bank (2014: 28), by then financially invested in Myanmar's political economic restructuring, argued that these changes marked the start of a transition to a market-oriented economy that promised to shepherd the country's largely rural population out of 'low-productivity' agrarian livelihoods and into 'good, formal sector jobs' in urban manufacturing and services. Anticipating rapid economic growth, Western financial media began to speak of a metaphorical 'gold rush' in Myanmar (*National Post* 2012) and a 'last frontier' for windfall investment returns (Kent 2012). In this context, major international corporations, which had previously been wary of having their brands tarnished by association with the country's blatantly illiberal labor practices, embraced the opportunity to invest in what was among the cheapest labor markets in Asia (Banerjee 2019). Before

long, international apparel brands like H&M, Zara, Adidas, and Gap were sourcing their products from the mostly Chinese-owned factories in Myanmar's nascent garment and footwear industry (Mullins 2015). Academics, meanwhile, foretold of Myanmar's "tentative renaissance" (Farrelly and Gabusi 2015). As for poverty, while admittedly widespread, it came to be seen as a largely rural matter, affecting individuals "untouched by the gains [of] the new economy" (Thawngmung 2019: 3–4).

In this way, Myanmar's transition narrative came to reflect conventional modernization theory, and notably the dual-sector model that Arthur Lewis (1954) advanced shortly after World War II. With this model, Lewis proposed that, in newly independent countries, domestic industrial development would draw labor out of a pre-capitalist agrarian economy and into urban capitalist employment. It was in this vein that Keith Hart subsequently conceptualized the so-called informal sector—a sector, Hart (1973) argued, encompassing ad hoc forms of unregulated self-employment that rural-to-urban migrants adopted until they achieved entry into formal wage labor. In Myanmar, then, the contemporary transition narrative reiterates an old tale whereby "good, formal sector jobs" are promised as that which defines liberal capitalist modernity.

At least that was the idea. On the ground, Myanmar's transition has in fact been a continuation of decades-long postsocialist restructuring, which a reconstituted military junta initiated following the 1988 popular uprising against military-dominated state capitalism. Characterizing this extended period of political economic restructuring have been widespread land confiscation by military and corporate actors (Mark and Belton 2020), rural dispossession through market transactions (Woods 2020), a decline in agricultural employment (Myat Thida Win and Aye Mya Thinzar 2016), and a massive increase in household debt (Griffiths 2018; Fujita 2009). The outcome, in short, has been an exacerbated market dependence for the bulk of the population. And it is this generalized market dependence, as market compulsion, that qualifies Myanmar's present conditions as constitutively capitalist (see Li 2014; Wood 1999).

In response, the country's overwhelmingly rural population has migrated in large numbers to neighboring countries (Campbell 2018a), and to plantations, fish farms, mines, and industrial zones elsewhere in Myanmar (Griffiths and Ito 2016). For internal migrants arriving at large urban centers, like Yangon, real estate inflation has created a nearly insurmountable barrier to accessing housing through formal rental markets (Campbell 2019b). The result has been

a proliferation of informal squatter settlements spread across urban industrial peripheries. In Yangon, hundreds of settlements of this sort now house close to half a million residents (Forbes 2016: 207). As ex-rural dwellers, such squatters are the very individuals to whom the World Bank holds out the promise of ‘good, formal sector jobs.’ To the extent, therefore, that such individuals have not accessed jobs of this sort, they remain, conceptually, outside of Myanmar’s current transition, as though *not yet* incorporated into liberal capitalist modernity. Yet insofar as their labor—often unwaged, often unfree, and often in violation of formal labor protections—is conditioned, all the same, by market compulsions, it remains, I will argue, still constitutively capitalist.

In domestic English-language media, such informal settlements have been variously called slums, shantytowns, and squatter settlements. In Burmese, they are most often labelled *kyu kyaw*—a term that translates into English as trespasser or invader. Invoking such condemnatory language, news media and government officials regularly decry such settlements as sites of illegality and unsanitary behavior, and as breeding grounds for disease (e.g., Aung Phay Kyi Soe 2020; Phyo Wai Kyaw 2018). They are, in short, matter out of place (Douglas 1966), and as such they disrupt the conceptual purity of the city as a site of legality and formal rule. Such loaded characterizations, which give rise to an ideological devaluation, have legitimized the under-provision of government infrastructure, and have served as a precursor to eviction, as settlements of this sort are regularly targeted for removal to make way for industrial development and elite residential enclaves. Such is the case for rural areas also, where claims of ‘low-productivity’ agrarian livelihoods serve to legitimate rural dispossession. This devaluation–eviction combination follows a pattern in urban governance globally, as research on gentrification has effectively documented (Morell 2015, 2018; Smith 1996). Simply put, devaluation is a core relational component of dispossession (Harvey 2003: 150). Together, dispossession and devaluation dialectically constitute a regime of value that undergirds informal living arrangements.

In one notorious case from 2017, the Yangon regional government dispatched some two hundred police officers along with upwards of seven hundred ‘hired heavies’ armed with clubs, swords, axes, and chainsaws to demolish all residences at a settlement of about four thousand squatter households located in Yangon Region’s northern Hlegu Township (Moe Myint 2017). None of the evicted squatters received any compensation. Motivating the eviction, the Yangon



Figure 2.3. Yangon slum labor. © Stephen Campbell

government had recently entered into partnership with an unnamed private company that was planning to develop the area into a high-end residential estate with an accompanying golf course and private hospital (Wa Lone 2017).

On the one hand, such treatment of slum populations—devaluation, infrastructural neglect, under-provisioning of services, and at times eviction—suggests an attitude of ‘let die’ following from the apparent redundancy of such populations to the needs of capital (Li 2010). And indeed, such a conceptualization of slum residents informs Ferguson’s (2015: 11, 23, 90) characterization of said individuals as a population ‘functionally isolated’ from capitalist production. Considered historically and globally, however, governments and capitalist employers have regularly ‘allowed’ the early death of individuals even with regular employment in capitalist enterprises (see Karmel 2019). The implication here is that an attitude of ‘let die’ on the part of governments and owners of capital cannot be read as indicating, in itself, that affected populations are functionally isolated from capitalist production.

In fact, the opposite is often the case, as ideological boundary work can serve to demarcate populations *seemingly* redundant to capital whose labor nonetheless remains integral to capital accumulation.

Stated otherwise, capitalism requires regular creation of ‘surplus populations’ – the latter thus being *inherent* to capitalism. Such is Jason Moore’s (2015, ch.9) argument concerning the material-symbolic fashioning of ‘cheap labor,’ whereby labor that remains wholly or partly uncommodified serves to subsidize capitalist production elsewhere. Moore’s primary referent on this matter is the unpaid labor of social reproduction, as theorized in the feminist literature on the subject since the 1970s. Sylvia Federici (2012: 28), for example, has argued that the exploitation of unwaged workers—not only ‘housewives,’ but also slaves, colonial subjects, prisoners, and students (see Mateescu and Kalb, this volume)—has been all the more effective than waged exploitation “because the lack of a wage hid it . . . where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.” For the ideological work involved here, Nancy Fraser (2016: 103) employs the term ‘boundary struggles,’ understood as contestations over the drawing of “boundaries delimiting ‘economy’ from ‘society,’ ‘production’ from ‘reproduction,’ and ‘work’ from ‘family’” – frontlines of value, we call them in this collection.

The literature on social reproduction has primarily attended to unpaid domestic work. However, Alexander Chayanov’s (1991: 6) earlier theorization of self-exploitation involved a similar argument regarding peasant farms that had been ‘vertically integrated’ into the value chains of capitalist enterprises, such that peasant agriculture became reorganized ‘according to capitalist principles,’ but in which financial returns on peasant labor time remained below that of workers engaged in equivalent waged employment. Both Giovanni Arrighi (1970) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1976) argued that, for similar reasons, capital has often sought to maintain conditions of semi-proletarianization, and thus *prevent* full proletarianization. In such cases of ‘household’ production, as with the unpaid labor of social reproduction, the material-symbolic work of narrowly delimiting normative capitalist labor is critical to the reproduction of a poorly remunerated, non-normative ‘other,’ laboring as the unacknowledged and ‘informal’ underbelly of formal capital accumulation.

In a similar manner, within contemporary Myanmar, the precarious informal economy has served to enrich an emerging bourgeoisie and subsidize an emerging middle class—both of which claim privileged status grounded in the ‘formal’ economy. It is, then, to such nonstandard forms of labor that I turn in the section that follows. My aim is to establish the capitalist character of such labor, and to contest characterizations that would construe such labor as outside of Myanmar’s emerging capitalist modernity. I turn, therefore, to eth-

nographic research that I began in 2017 with residents of Yadana, as I am calling it—a squatter settlement of approximately one thousand households sandwiched between garment factories and storage depots on the industrial outskirts of Yangon.

The Mushroom at the Heart of Capital

By the time Aunty Cho quit working at the riverside gravel depot, she had been at it four years—four years bearing baskets of sand, bricks, and gravel on her shoulder as she loaded and unloaded shipments at the river's edge, in the industrial zone where she resided. The work had already given her husband, Hla Soe, a repetitive strain injury in his foot that, on a doctor's instructions, had put an end to his own career as a porter of sand, bricks, and gravel. And so, when Aunty Cho, by then well into her forties, decided to likewise exit this so-demanding labor, the depot owner promptly evicted the couple from their onsite quarters, together with their two young daughters. It was at this point that the family moved into a bamboo and dani palm hut in the Yadana squatter settlement, which lay just minutes down the road from the depot where wife and husband had until recently labored.¹

By then, the three industrial plots on which the settlement lay were at capacity. There being no vacant land on which to build a hut of their own, the couple were left having to rent lodgings from a veteran squatter who had arrived early enough to claim land on which to build one residence for himself and another for use as rental property. It was upon moving into said accommodations that Aunty Cho and Hla Soe began collecting waste for resale—a livelihood pursued by hundreds of the settlement's residents. Like most residents of the Yadana squatter settlement, the couple were refugees from the delta, having migrated to Yangon following the 2008 cyclone Nargis, which had left over 138,000 people dead (three of whom were Aunty Cho's children). The cyclone had also devastated the delta's economy and infrastructure, leaving local inhabitants dependent on a market that offered little in the way of employment.

As a rule, the labor of waste collection in the township where Yadana lies requires constant walking. Moreover, the distance to be covered on foot doing this work has only increased with the settlement's expansion, as heightened competition for discarded plastics, cardboard, and metals has compelled the hundreds of Yadana residents who engage in this labor to walk farther afield and for more

hours each day in order to collect sufficient materials to cover their immediate living expenses. Such was the situation when, one day, Hla Soe encountered a low-ranking official from the local township development committee. The official informed Hla Soe that by paying a monthly fee the latter could obtain monopoly collection rights over the local refuse transfer point. The arrangement would allow Hla Soe and Aunty Cho to acquire saleable materials without having to walk long distances each day. It was an offer the couple readily accepted, and for which they considered themselves lucky—not least given Hla Soe's foot injury.

The arrangement in question here is curious, as not once did the couple receive any sort of receipt for the fee that they paid each month to obtain sole collection rights at this site, which served as the neighborhood trash repository. The agreement remained, in other words, informal. It is also not what is done downtown. There, municipal employees identifiable in fluorescent pinnies earn monthly salaries to collect refuse and to maintain the city's various waste collection points. By contrast, in the peripheral township where Yadana lies, officials of the township development committee had evidently figured out that, not only could they avoid hiring waste workers to carry out said duties, but poor slum residents would be willing to *pay them* for the right to manage these sites.

So, there at the neighborhood refuse transfer point Uncle Hla Soe would sift through items discarded each day, sorting resalable wares according to their respective materials—plastic bottles here, copper wire there. Meanwhile, Aunty Cho, who had suffered no foot injury, continued her rounds through the township's streets and laneways, pushing before her a rusted metal collection cart in which she put whatever items she picked up along the way. The cart, however, was not her own. It belonged instead to Mister Arul, an ethnic Tamil who owned and operated the waste purchasing depot where Aunty Cho and Hla Soe would every couple of weeks sell the plastics, metals, and cardboard they had amassed. Mister Arul, always taciturn and polite, lent this cart out to the couple free of charge. This he likewise did for all fourteen of the households that made use of his collection carts. What is more, he would, on request, lend these same households microcredit interest free. The only requirement, Mister Arul explained one day, while seated at a wooden desk behind a mountain of plastic bottles inside his waste purchasing compound, was that these collectors dutifully sell their wares only to him—meaning not to any of the other thirty or so purchasing depots operating in the township. It was an arrangement that Aunty Cho and Hla Soe

claimed to have not once violated in the two-and-a-half years they had worked collecting discarded items. Reflecting on the mutual commitment involved in this agreement, Mister Arul, still seated at his desk, went on to explain: “We’ve grown close. They would never sell elsewhere.”

It was within this working relationship that Aunty Cho, together with her husband, had repeatedly entered into debt—borrowing 160,000 kyat one year to cover funeral expenses for her mother-in-law and sister, and 120,000 kyat a year later to purchase gold earrings for her two young daughters. But regarding this debt, Aunty Cho seemed unperturbed. She spoke highly of Mister Arul’s amiable character. And as for the debt, Mister Arul as creditor merely deducted manageable repayment amounts from the money he paid to the couple for the items they regularly brought to him for resale. Aunty Cho thus spoke of their relationship as being based on loyalty (*thitsa*), trust (*yongyihmu*), and understanding (*nalehmhu*). But still, the couple were bound by debt to a monopsonistic arrangement—a market, that is, with only a single buyer. It has been arrangements of this sort that have come to be labelled disguised wage labor, for seemingly self-employed sellers in such cases remain bound, as though employees, to a single purchaser who is able to set the price of sale, and who thus comes to operate akin to an employer (Harris-White 2014: 988).

As for the materials that Mister Arul purchases in this way, he sells them to recycling plants in neighboring townships where they are broken down and resold domestically or exported as production materials to industrial manufacturers in China. The labor of Aunty Cho and her husband has thus been integrated into the bottom of an immense global supply chain, the contemporary expansion of which has led to a proliferation of ethnographic studies on informal waste reclamation in, for example, India (Gill 2009), Turkey (Dinler 2016), Ghana (Chalfin 2019), and Brazil (Millar 2018). Taking stock of the incorporation of such ‘informal’ workers into this now massive ‘formal’ global industry, Kathleen Millar (2018: 8) has rightly argued that if such laborers are deemed “superfluous to capital accumulation, then it becomes impossible to ask how the materials they collect are tied into a 200-billion-dollar global recycling industry.” What is more, in neighboring Thailand, where I have conducted related research on waste reclamation, the expansion of this ‘informal’ industry is due in large measure to government initiatives explicitly aimed at outsourcing and thereby subsidizing the country’s growing waste disposal needs (Campbell 2018b: 280). All of this illustrates how the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ are not distinct economic sectors, but rather

mutually constitutive aspects of capital accumulation everywhere (see also Neveling 2014).

A similar arrangement among foragers of matsutake mushrooms informs Anna Tsing's (2015: 63) concept of *salvage accumulation*: "the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced." It was with this understanding that Tsing (*ibid.*: 296, n.4) proceeded to characterize such labor as operating "outside capitalist logics." However, aside from a capitalist context of generalized market compulsions, the logics of debt relations—about which Tsing does not speak—means seemingly self-employed producers like Aunty Cho cannot be deemed wholly free of capitalist control. Instead, the arrangement is akin to what Chayanov (1991) identified as vertical capitalist integration, and what Marx ([1867] 1976: 1020–21) spoke of as the formal subsumption of labor to capital, as seen in the putting-out arrangements of England's early modern textile industry, where merchant capitalists dispensed in-kind advances to maintain indirect control over peasant's home-based production. In such arrangements, peasants whose textile production was limited to seasonal cottage industry were able to keep production costs down by employing unpaid family labor (including that of children), engaging in longer work hours despite decreasing marginal returns (self-exploitation), and subsidizing household consumption with domestically produced agriculture. Such labor was not, and is not, however, wholly 'outside' of capitalist logics. In fact, such arrangements have proliferated in the present under the flexibilization of industrial production, as in Thailand's garment sector, where the introduction of putting-out arrangements has allowed managers to complement factory production by shifting certain tasks to outworkers not covered by existing labor laws (Campbell 2016). In these ways, the frontline spaces of value in capitalist modernity remain structured by a "coexistence of formal and real subsumption" (Mezzadra 2011: 314).

Such arrangements are more ambiguous, however, where children labor without wages alongside their parents on the factory floor. This was the case with 16-year-old Su Su, a resident of Yadana who had started working alongside her mother at the age of nine. The girl's mother, persistently in debt and working piece rate in a shrimp processing plant at the time, had felt it necessary to bring Su Su along to help increase her output, and thus her wages. As a child laborer, nine-year-old Su Su had not been alone; there were other children her age and older laboring alongside their mothers in the shrimp plant's casual workforce. Tasked with peeling and beheading prawns as an

unregistered ‘helper,’ Su Su’s output was incorporated with that of her mother; the girl received no separate wage. Her mother, however, used their combined income to support their entire household. And although she labored on the factory floor, Su Su was not in any direct employment relationship with the factory manager. Her position was thus similar to the unwaged children who assist their mothers with piece rate trimming under putting-out arrangements in the home, as I have documented in Thailand’s garment sector (Campbell 2016: 78).

Overlapping with the exclusion of home-based workers from labor protection legislation has been the ideological devaluation of such nonstandard labor forms, which have often been highly feminized. Such were the findings of Maria Mies’s (1982) path-breaking study of the lace industry in Narsapur, India. Documenting what she would later call ‘housewifization,’ Mies found that merchant capitalists characterized the women who made lace under putting-out arrangements as ‘housewives’ so as to construe their incomes as merely supplemental to that of their husbands or fathers as primary breadwinners. This devaluation of women’s labor in putting-out arrangements facilitated the latter’s ongoing exclusion from labor protection laws and union organizing drives. It has, moreover, been the consequently lower cost of such labor and the exclusion of affected workers from labor protection laws that ensures such nonstandard labor arrangements remain attractive alternatives to more directly managed labor employed in-house. In this regard, consider the Uber Corporation’s relentless efforts to keep their drivers legally classified as ‘independent contractors’ rather than employees, and to construe said driving as merely a source of ‘supplementary’ part-time income. This legal-ideological move situates affected drivers outside of labor protection laws and minimum wage regulations. Going further, Uber has extended car loans to prospective drivers, thus bonding indebted individuals to the labor arrangement—the drivers’ loan repayments “taken straight out of their wages” (Hook 2016).

To be sure, workers in such arrangements often value the relative autonomy of laboring outside direct capitalist management. Some of Tsing’s (2015: 77) interlocutors, for example, went so far as to assert that, for this reason, they did not consider their labor of foraging to be ‘work.’ Nevertheless, where workers in such seemingly independent arrangements lack alternative means of support—as is the case in Myanmar—they remain compelled by the market to produce commodities whose value can only be realized on the market. Their situation becomes even more like ‘work’ when carried out under conditions of debt. Take, for example, Aunty Cho’s neighbor, Aye

Win, who pursued, as a means of livelihood, the scavenging of earth worms that she sold for use as bait to a local eel merchant—a man to whom she was also indebted. While Aye Win at first labeled her occupation self-employment (*kobaing alok*), she would, as we spoke, occasionally slip into calling the merchant her employer (*alokshin*). The same eel merchant had also lent hundreds of thousands of kyat for the purchase of motorcycles to several young men at Yadana who were expected to use these vehicles to transport the eels they trapped in dispersed urban pools of stagnant water. It was due to the large debts these collectors had with the eel merchant that Aye Win considered eel hunting, even more so than worm collection, an employment relation. “You can’t call eel catchers self-employed,” she asserted. “They’ve borrowed so much money from the eel merchant that if they take a day or two off, the merchant will get after them. If they have a health issue, they’re allowed to rest. But if they don’t have a health issue, they’re not allowed to rest.” It is worth noting here that eel merchants, as well as the owners of waste purchasing depots, could, in principle, hire their collectors as wage laborers. Such arrangements, however, would presumably increase labor costs for the merchants in question, and affected workers would come under the scope of existing labor protection laws—laws that, admittedly, remain poorly enforced in Myanmar.

Much, therefore, as Chayanov documented among Russian peasants, the labor of eel collection and that of informal waste reclamation have been ‘vertically integrated’ into capitalist production networks. And rather than being autonomous of capitalist logics, the work in question is being managed by merchant capitalists who act as coordinators of a dispersed division of labor. Nonstandard forms of capitalist labor in such cases are thus not precapitalist relics destined to give way to waged employment under the ‘universalizing mission’ of capital. Instead, such arrangements have proliferated under the precarious conditions of Myanmar’s postsocialist entry into capitalism.

To return now to Aunty Cho and her husband, the couple resided, as I have said, at Yadana with their two youngest daughters. However, they had, as well, two other daughters—now adults—who at the time were living elsewhere. But in mid-2019, their eldest daughter, Su Myat, then 28 years old, came to stay with her parents at Yadana temporarily. It had by then been almost twenty years since she had lived with her parents, having been taken from her home when she was nine. “We were living hand-to-mouth,” recalled Aunty Cho of those years. Mired in cyclical debt, Aunty Cho and Hla Soe had at the time been attempting to get by on casual labor in fishing

and agriculture. It had been under these conditions that, one day, Su Myat's grandmother took her away. Informing the girl that she was to be employed as a domestic helper, her grandmother deposited her with a household across the river, took a three-month advance on the child's wages, and left. "I'd never been apart from my mother," recounted Sister Myat, "so I cried when she took me away. I didn't have any clothes or sandals with me. Grandma took me away and I cried as I went along with her. Grandma said to me, 'Your family is in a difficult situation, so don't cry. You have to do this for them.'" It had likewise been her grandmother who, from then on, went to collect regular advances on the girl's wages; her mother stayed away. "Had I gone," explained Aunty Cho, "she would've wanted to return with me."

As a domestic servant, Sister Myat had been responsible for cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her employer's children—in other words, the labor of social reproduction. Sister Myat recalled of that first household:

The employer wouldn't let me go out; I was in someone else's home, so for the most part I didn't have freedom; [and further], as a nine-year-old daughter, I was just a child—there was so much I didn't know. So, of course, I got beaten. I got yelled at. I was a child, so I might break a pot, and for that I'd get beaten.

After two years, Sister Myat's employer, a part-owner in a rice milling enterprise, fell into economic distress of his own and could no longer afford to retain the child. The girl's grandmother therefore took her to a new employer—a middle-aged woman who ran an alcohol parlor in a neighboring village. As proprietor, the woman made Sister Myat—11 years old at the time—labor as a waitress in the alcohol parlor, on top of her domestic duties. But regarding the hours she had worked or the money she had earned, Sister Myat could not say. "Back then, I didn't really understand money matters," she explained. "As I couldn't read, I never knew what day it was. And I didn't know how to read a clock." Like that, Sister Myat went on to change employers every few years, working as a domestic servant until she got married at 24 years of age to a young man from her natal village. By then, she had worked for eight households—her grandmother having collected her wages in advance up to the end, leaving the young woman perennially debt-bound to each consecutive employer.

Tragic though her case may have been, Sister Myat's childhood as a physically abused and debt-bound domestic servant, pressed into employment by her own family, was in no way exceptional

in Myanmar. In research carried out by the International Labor Organization, 26 percent of internal labor migrants surveyed in Myanmar were found to be in situations of bonded or other unfree labor, with 14 percent of them having been trafficked into these labor arrangements (ILO 2015: 6). Overlapping with these statistics, there were (as of 2018) 1.2 million child laborers in the country, aged 5 to 17, who worked an average of 52 hours per week, typically in conditions of debt bondage (Nyein Nyein 2018). In this context, Myanmar investigative journalists have brought to light horrific cases of domestic worker abuse—specifically, cases of employers beating, burning, scalding, and cutting their underage domestic servants with knives (Hla Hla Htay 2017; Ye Naing 2017).

For residents of the Yadana settlement, the sort of live-in domestic work in which Su Myat was employed remains uncommon. ‘Unfree labor,’ however, is not. Every year, dozens of young men from this settlement take what seem to be large cash advances in exchange for their commitment to work eight months at sea in the Gulf of Martaban on motorless bamboo rafts with just two or three other men, facing winds of up to 50 miles per hour, often short of food and drinking water, and tasked with lowering and drawing, every six hours, a 20-to-30 foot long ‘tiger mouth’ net, and then sorting, boiling, and drying on board the catch of mostly prawns. The raft fishing industry has become renowned in Myanmar for fraud, malnutrition, violence, and outright murder (Khin Myat Myat Wai 2018). Bonded by debt, stuck out at sea, and often laboring under threat of violence, it is not a job that one can easily leave.

Consider, now, that Marxists, too, have often accepted the bourgeois claim that capitalism is coterminous with ‘free’ wage labor. Take, for example, Benno Teschke (2003: 141), who puts the argument like this: “Once a capitalist property regime is established. . . direct producers are no longer coerced by extra-economic means to. . . work for a lord—since workers are politically free.” Capitalist labor arrangements are thus to be understood as but “civil contracts among politically (though not economically) free and equal citizens subject to civil law. . . [operating in] a non-coercive ‘economic economy’” (ibid.: 256).

It is this sort of economistic conception of capitalism that informs much of the anti-trafficking activism around ‘modern slavery’ in the offshore fishing industry based out of neighboring Thailand. A scandal over the ‘unfree’ labor in question made headlines globally following a series of exposés in 2015 (McDowell, Mason, and Mendoza 2015; EJF 2015). In this industry, as with the raft fisheries in Myanmar, deception, fraud, violence, and murder have been widely

reported by migrant fishermen, most of whom come from Myanmar. However, concerning the Thai case specifically, geographers Peter Vandergeest and Melissa Marschke have warned against use of the ‘modern slavery’ terminology. Notwithstanding the success of such language in mobilizing action, the “slavery framing reaffirms liberal and capitalist understandings of freedom and exploitation, in how it situates modern slavery as outside of capitalism and as ideologically incompatible with capitalist freedoms” (Vandergeest and Marschke 2019: 293). Such ‘unfree’ labor, in other words, is still capitalist, while capitalism is thereby heterogeneous.

What I have presented here is but a brief survey of certain nonstandard forms of capitalist labor undertaken by residents of the Yadana settlement—specifically, the work of seemingly self-employed scavengers bound by debt to merchant capitalists, and forms of waged employment in ‘unfree’ and often violent conditions of debt bondage. Beyond matters of precarity, what becomes evident when attending ethnographically to such nonstandard labor are the various relational dependencies—of kinship, credit, and rent, for example—that incorporate affected laborers into the broader capitalist social formation (Kalb 2015). Critically, however, in their non-normative informality, such relations escape liberalism’s narrow formal-legal vision of itself, even as they remain constitutive of the liberal capitalist order.

Taken together, the cases considered here illuminate something of the variegated character of contemporary capitalism—in Myanmar specifically, but also more generally. Crucially, there is no evidence that such nonstandard capitalist labor arrangements are in any way ‘antediluvian’ or destined to give way to ‘good, formal sector jobs’ under the momentum of capitalist modernization. Such enduring capitalist heterogeneity therefore calls for a coalitional approach to collective struggles—an approach that would bring together, for example, workplace mobilizations of waged laborers, squatters’ efforts to fight evictions, and movements demanding government support for childcare and other elements of household social reproduction. While not prominently articulated in this way, such interconnected social-political concerns informed the important role that many low-waged, precarious workers (including squatters) took in the mass street protests and general strike that erupted in Myanmar after the military seized power in February 2021 (Campbell 2021). What was particularly notable in the protests and strike was the coalitional participation of diverse segments of Myanmar’s population, including those outside of formal employment. While many protesters articulated their demands in terms of a restoration of electoral

rule under the ousted National League for Democracy government, others expressed more immediate material concerns whose resolution pointed beyond such liberal politics. So, while the implications of this ongoing revolt remain open-ended at the time of writing, the coalitional participation of a diverse spectrum of Myanmar society points toward an emancipatory horizon inclusive of those whom the preceding liberal transition had largely neglected.

Conclusion

One of the aims of this chapter has been to dispel the liberal myth that capitalism is coterminous with ‘free’ wage labor—or, more narrowly, with the Standard Employment Relationship. Instead, in much of the world, ‘nonstandard’ arrangements of capitalist labor are the enduring norm. Labor, consequently, remains needed, though often outside of formal employment. Under such conditions, the narrow ideological construal of capitalist modernity in terms of ‘good, formal sector jobs’ remains politically salient as a legitimizing discourse. Relegating, in this way, certain forms of labor to the ‘outside’ of capital de facto facilitates their devaluation, excludes said labor arrangements from labor protection legislation and minimum wage laws, and exculpates capitalist firms, state institutions, and advocates of a liberal capitalist order from the often-illiberal practices of the informal economy. In this way, value regimes of so-called informal labor, as a frontline of value, are made to serve as the unacknowledged underbelly of formal capital accumulation. Meanwhile, formal state policies and formal capitalist enterprises continue to vertically integrate informal regimes of life and labor into capitalist supply chains. Such life and labor are not, therefore, autonomous of capitalist logics.

Under such conditions, labor formalization, understood as the extension and enforcement of legal protections over select labor arrangements, serves as a manner of hegemonic inclusion (Campbell 2019c). But with so much that remains *excluded*, labor formalization as a hegemonic project continues to be, across most of the world, narrowly *selective* (Smith 2011). Capitalism, in short, remains heterogeneous, while much non-standard labor in the present remains capitalist, rather than ontologically *other*.

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Note

1. Further details of this case were published in Campbell 2020, 733–35.

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— Chapter 3 —

CARBON AS VALUE

Four Short Stories of Ecological Civilization in China

Charlotte Bruckermann



Introduction: Blue Sky Promises

Pollution Season. Red Alert. Airpocalypse. These alarmist buzzwords sound like the work of science fiction. In China these terms describe annual events that deeply affect citizens' capacity to go about their daily lives, as factories stop production, schools close down, airplanes remain grounded, and cars are forbidden to drive. As smog, soot, and dust occlude the sky with noxious haze, citizens remain at home as much as possible, ideally with the comfort of domestic air purifiers, but at least with windowpanes shielding them and their loved ones from choking in the atmosphere thick with particulate matter. Over the past two decades these events have become routine. Yet they continue to generate potential antagonism, as citizens demand the right to breathe freely and healthily.

These events come at enormous economic cost: directly from disrupting production, and by proxy through health costs and the inability to work, study and generally be productive, both during periods of smog-filled skies and in the drawn-out fallout. The 'cost' of air pollution is notoriously hard to calculate. Pollution levels are measured and monitored as particulate matter in the atmosphere, and many citizens check this alongside the weather on a daily basis. The long-term 'cost' of anthropogenic climate change resulting from the changing chemical compositions of the atmosphere is even harder to evaluate. Carbon calculations, typically measured in tonnes of CO₂

or equivalent greenhouse gases emitted, attempt to accomplish this type of accounting by placing a price on pollution.

In China the political consequences of atmospheric pollution and climate change epitomize a gamble by the Communist Party on state legitimacy that could overshadow any economic costs. Environmental action becomes increasingly pressing, as citizens around the country demand cleaner air, water, and land, such that calls to reduce environmental degradation launch a challenge to the authoritarian regime. The stifling pollution has kick-started a process of environmental restitution, with the CCP promising a coming “blue sky” (*lantian*) through the creation of an “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming*) that would reduce carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions (Aunan et al. 2017).

These environmental goals belong to a broader set of government attempts to achieve a “relatively comfortable society” (*xiaokang shehui*). This term was first brought forward in state policy by the post-Maoist Reform Era leader Deng Xiaoping during the market reforms from 1978. At the time, fostering prosperity through sustained GDP growth offered citizens the gratifications of market consumption after the demise of high socialist ideals with Mao Zedong’s passing. Nonetheless, the environmental turn reflects a change from earlier articulations of the policy *beyond* economic growth. Under President Xi Jinping the well-being model has shifted priorities. Greening no longer forms an epiphenomenon, but is a key component of the party’s platform (Hansen, Li, and Svarverud 2018). Xi even pledged to peak carbon emissions by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality for the world’s largest economy by 2060.

These promises are not pure pipe dreams. Although the Chinese economy, and especially its backbone in heavy industries, relies on coal for about two-thirds of its energy mix, the country also spearheads clean energy technologies, such as solar panels and wind turbines (Finamore 2018). While coal is by far the biggest culprit in this carbon bill, the destructive forces of fire, the sapping depletion of groundwater, and the dwindling drops of rainfall certainly beg the question of whether environmental risk, health damages, and economic processes can be rendered commensurable through carbon emissions and legible in terms of financial cost.



Figure 3.1. Decarbonizing the countryside with solar fields in Hubei.
© Charlotte Bruckermann

Carbon as Value?

Carbon quantification is central to this system. It provides a solution to the problem of the realization of value by allowing investment into production to continue, and enabling practices of consumption to grow. Calculating greenhouse gas emissions in everything from power plants to forestry reserves, and plastic toys to bicycle rides, carbon accounting renders environmental degradation quantifiable, legible, and monetizable. Highly diverse processes, objects, and activities thereby become commensurate and exchangeable, and subject to market mechanisms and financial speculation, especially in the form of carbon credits that put the right to emit tonnes of CO₂ and equivalent greenhouse gases up for sale. Finding a definitive explanation of what a carbon credit *is*, through analogies with trading in commodities, risk, and currencies, has been subject to debate (see Christophers 2018; Dalsgaard 2013; Descheneau and Paterson 2011; Günel 2016; Lohmann 2010; Newell and Paterson 2010). Yet the particularities of carbon quantification and emissions exchanges within the Chinese context from a value perspective begs the question of what carbon credits *do*.

Whether a particular value is alienable or inalienable (Godelier 1996), commensurable or incommensurable (Gudeman 2008), or calculable or incalculable (Guyer 2004) has been a long-standing focus for anthropologists who acknowledged that what cannot be sold, compared, or counted is often the most ethically, socially, or environmentally valued (Graeber 2001, see also Bohannon 1955). These Weberian, at times Maussian, approaches trace coexisting spheres, regimes or tournaments of value in their diversity (Appadurai 1986), yet nonetheless predominantly revolve around market principles or exchange relations in their estimation (Elyachar 2005). When considering the operations of climate capitalism through the carbon metric, the seeping of 'insidious capital' into everyday activities and vernacular formulations of value, including the metabolism of earth, nature, and life itself, looms large (Kalb, this volume).

Putting a price on carbon emissions, whether through markets or taxes, has been considered key to ameliorating ecological catastrophes arising from atmospheric toxicity and anthropogenic climate change in global environmental governance. And yet, price does not equate to value, and the exchange relations and market principles allegedly underpinning commodity prices in capitalist circulation do not exhaust the value relation. Rather than representing inherent value through a naturalized price, commodities circulating in the market detach from the social relations of production through their exchange value, with a price masking the exploitation, dispossession, and extraction underlying their origins, and alienating producers from the products of their labor. As such, a political economy analysis of the value relation from a Marxian perspective supports a pluralist value framework (Turner 2008), where notions of dignity and worth meet logics of production and circulation (Franquesa 2018), yet ultimately also drive vertical processes of accumulation (Kalb, this volume).

In a sense, beyond logics of markets, exchange, and accumulation, value may seem like an excess 'outside' of the value relation of political economy. And yet, as one moves along the scalar disjuncture between value, for instance as personal dignity or ecological worth, more encompassing notions of value emerge along the posited chain of value. Specifically, environmental conflicts bring fissures and contradictions between competing values into stark relief, with even practitioners themselves often engaging in explicit valuation arguments while championing a future world ecology (see Tsing 2004; West 2005). Global experts in the world of carbon finance routinely and explicitly welcome the 'added value' of this 'payment

for ecosystem services,' while the Chinese state hails enlightened 'ecologically conscious' (*shengtai yishi*) citizens to lead a 'low carbon life' (*ditan shenghuo*), and thereby help to realize the political project of 'ecological civilization' (Bruckermann 2023). Carbon as a value sits uneasily at the point where large-scale forms of accumulation from carbon finance meet personal commitments to environmental restitution. Not only does this juncture of 'insidious capital' generate the 'intimate contradictions' Don Kalb describes in the Introduction, but carbon as a value acts as both a 'driver of accumulation' and a 'form of attachment' that underwrites grand narratives of 'civilizational value.' Rather than an 'outside' of political economy, nature here emerges as a key vector of value within contemporary capitalism.

Carbon quantification also debunks the narrative of nature as a potential 'outside' of capitalism through debates over planetary boundaries and global commons, on the one hand, and debates about the value of labor, on the other. The process of carbon quantification could be naively construed as indicative of capitalism recognizing the planet as part of a 'global commons,' thereby imbuing the rise of carbon markets with utopian impulses. Yet, from this perspective, what carbon offers is simply privatizing these commons through property rights, especially when multiplying environmental dynamics are simply rendered as 'other' externalities to be brought into capital calculations. Considering the central role of a 'value regime' in the ecological crisis of capitalism brings clarity to this process (see Kalb, this volume). Moving beyond 'the commons' as an egalitarian and affective sphere of mutuality that stands in contrast to the calculative self-interested manifested in spheres of exchange (De Angelis 2007), the primacy of the value relation in capitalist processes of exploitation and extraction overcomes shortcomings of a limited labor theory of value (Elson 1979; Harvey 2018; Walker 2016, 2017).

Drawing on the insight that it is the withdrawal or refusal of labor, whether the living labor of the female domestic worker or the enslaved colonial subject, that crystallizes in contradictions and confronts capitalism with ongoing crises (Moore 2016), this chapter turns to the nexus of energy and labor within the shadows of apocalyptic contractions (Caffentzis et al. 1980). From the sixteenth century onward, various strategies of mapping land, utilizing energy, and quantifying labor allowed a new regime of value to emerge (Moore 2016). This enabled the exploitation of abstract labor through the wage relation, and simultaneously fostered the appropriation of abstract nature through the unpaid work and reproductive processes

of human and nonhuman nature (*ibid.*). Cheapening and devaluing living labor and nature subsequently legitimizes the intervention of capital to infuse value to labor and nature to which it has previously laid ‘waste’ (Franquesa 2018; Walker 2016, 2017; see also Peña-Valderama 2023). Yet here we come to the limits of the political economy of value in its quantifiable form, as degraded landscapes, polluted atmospheres, and inhumane livelihoods generate revolts of human and extra-human nature.

The economy of carbon credits, with its quantified metric of the emission for greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, sits at this node between value as an abstraction of the political economy, on the one hand, and values in their ethical diversity, cultural complexity, and ecological entanglement, on the other. This chapter argues that the efficacy of carbon does not lie in symbiotically realigning capitalism with nature, nor in generating an alternate source of value to capitalist logics. Instead, carbon masks contradictions between economic growth and environmental sustainability, capital accumulation and political legitimation, and financial debt and green credit, in highly uneven and extractive ways. Exploring the crux between value and values in carbon governance, and how the insertion of carbon into capitalist processes allows for processes of exploitation and extraction to continue, reveals human and extra-human resistance to continuing with business as usual, potentially bringing life as we know it to a halt.

The value perspective illuminates a central aspect of the carbon relation in climate science and environmental policy: carbon as simultaneously value and anti-value. Exchanges in carbon emissions reductions promise that humanity can save itself from ecological catastrophe without limiting economic growth. This assurance rests upon the idea that carbon pricing will limit ecological destruction through the financial incentives and cost deterrents dictated by the exchange value for environmental degradation. Despite the institutional framework the Kyoto Protocol set for allocating responsibility for atmospheric pollution and limiting global emissions reductions according to expert models, carbon markets around the world have failed to achieve ecological redress. Tracing experiences of the boom and bust of various emissions exchanges in China, I argue that carbon credits remain just that, credits, a form of ecological debt in which payment, and risk, is deferred until some point in an uncertain future.

While a debt repaid constitutes value, a default constitutes anti-value, potentially bringing the entire system to a halt (Harvey 2018).

But whether the carbon credit becomes realized as value or anti-value, the destructive work of capitalism on humans and the environment continues. Despite this failing in the system in terms of the purported outcome of carbon markets as reducing emissions, they nonetheless fulfill a mythic, even utopian, function. This redemptive impulse emanates from emissions exchanges as the socio-technical fix to the failure of capitalism to safeguard the reproduction of life through atmospheric composition and climatic constancy. This is because carbon markets allow the economy to grow, despite ecological degradation, and provide capacities for refinancing and bailing out failing emissions exchanges, as a succession of follow-up schemes soften the fallout of previous schemes.

Although carbon circulates globally, it hits the ground in highly uneven and unequal ways. As carbon flows in global, national, and local environmental governance, the metric reshapes landscapes, populations, and subjectivities. This manifests in projects for regional beautification and design infrastructure, from forging low-carbon landscapes to erecting forest cities, from green branding of hotels and tourism operations to the construction of energy efficient infrastructure, all in the name of forging 'low carbon life' as a mode of being. While carbon appears as if it solves the environmental-capitalist contradiction of endless growth and limited resources, it only does so within its own terms—that is, as an abstract and aggregate quantification unfolding under the rigorous yet distorted logic of abstraction. Concrete places and lives, both in capitalist production centers and in ecological compensation spaces, must be devalued as 'cheap' to legitimize the intervention of capital to exploit, expropriate, and deplete these regions. Meanwhile, the imaginary of the ecological green city inhabited by well-educated middle classes doing creative work does not exist beyond a sum of indicators, or as a future utopia elusively out of reach.

The developmental aspiration of a low-carbon civilization envisions an increasingly middle-class population concentrated in sustainable cities, with the countryside serving as a reservoir from which to exploit vital, and cheap, resources, such as labor, energy, and even clean air. To achieve this goal, the Chinese government is instituting emissions exchanges as mechanisms to balance and reduce pollution from industrial, cosmopolitan, and financial heartlands through sourcing sustainable energy and planting forests in peripheral green lungs. The resulting rural-urban transformation entrenches spatial, social, financial, and technological inequality in contemporary Chinese, and global, capitalism.

To approach Chinese carbon markets ethnographically, this research focuses on ‘critical junctions’ (Kalb and Tak 2005) where capital accumulation and value generation are not only created, but contested. Although environmental degradation contains the potential for uniting the shared interests of citizens across class divides, China’s pursuit of low-carbon development not only transforms, but also exacerbates the transformation of class inequalities. In particular, three classes of green citizens emerge through the institutionalization of carbon accounting: first, financial and political elites who stand to profit from the financialization of environmental processes, particularly through carbon trading and related activities as ‘green investors’; second, middle-class citizens seeking political intervention into pollution problems and environmental justice, who enter the carbon market as ‘green consumers’; and third, rural farmers, peasants, and workers who cultivate, profit from or become supplanted by carbon finance as ‘green producers’ of emissions reductions and offsets. In the following section I will present four ethnographic ‘carbon cases’ that illuminate relational struggles ‘from above,’ where capital and state classes seek to maintain their returns on capital; ‘from the middle,’ where citizens scramble to protect and uphold allegedly ‘freely chosen’ values; and struggles ‘from below’ that aim to challenge suppression, marginalization, and devaluation, sometimes with anticapitalist potential (Kalb, Introduction).

The Chinese Carbon Market and the Energy Sector

Emissions exchanges establish a market for the right to emit greenhouse gases through buying and selling standardized, quantified, and monetized units of ‘carbon,’ one tonne of CO₂ or greenhouse gas equivalent. Often simply known as ‘carbon markets,’ these mechanisms establish a trade between carbon ‘debts’ accrued by emitting greenhouse gases, and carbon ‘credits’ produced by cutting or offsetting emissions with environmental practices, such as renewable energy and forestry projects. After experimenting with regional carbon markets since 2011, China finally launched its unified carbon market in 2021. Especially in the early 2010s, the price collapse of the UN-backed carbon market and the long-time ineffectiveness of the EU emissions exchange made anxieties and expectations for the Chinese carbon trade run high, as the largest emissions exchange in the world gradually expanded to encompass more industrial sectors. In the lead-up, the rollout of the national emissions exchange

was continuously deferred, and has now, initially, been limited in scope to the energy sector. In a sector dominated by state-owned enterprises, the state is effectively monitoring itself through the market mechanism.

The boom and bust of this succession of carbon markets, from the global UN framework to the regional EU emissions exchange, informed the rise of carbon markets in China, as the fear of stranded assets and the political pressure on the CCP to address pollution mounted. Under the direction of political cadres, think-tank researchers, carbon consultants, financial traders, environmental experts, software developers and energy engineers, the metric of carbon as a global market mechanism for environmental governance became entangled with national priorities focused on 'performance legitimacy' through the speculative futures of carbon, despite limited ecological efficacy. This chimes with attempts by the Chinese state to assuage citizens' demands for ecological justice, particularly in relation to atmospheric pollution and climate change as part of a new 'performative governance' (Ding 2020) that rests on the spectacle of environmental quantification as political accountability.

In the establishment of the national carbon market, priorities have shifted as the market has been repeatedly postponed and now unrolled in a far more limited form than previously anticipated. The State Council announced in 2017 that the national carbon market would initially only cover the energy sector, based on benchmarks and carbon intensity levels, and be limited to spot trading. It has also been demoted in national priority from the integrated National Development and Reform Commission to the more task-specific and less-powerful Ministry of Ecology and Environment. In parallel, a new focus on green bonds emerged that now absorbs and directs most carbon finance in China. This has led to a boom and bust in anticipation, aspiration, and speculation in carbon futures.

The central role of the state as the enforcer of its administrative mechanisms for carbon emissions exchanges bears consideration in China and beyond. As the Chinese state acts as both the environmental regulator of carbon-intensive sectors and the actual owner of potentially stranded assets, such as the coal industry, it leads to an internal clash of interests that brings out the contradictions between growth and sustainability even more sharply than in a classic 'neoliberal' context (Nonini 2008). Patrick Bigger (2015), for instance, has argued that the Californian carbon market creates barriers to production, or at least it hypothetically has the power to do so, through setting caps on carbon emissions. Rather than a freewheeling market,

this creates a kind of rationing system in which the state can accumulate capital by rent extraction from producers of the surplus value in circulation.

This is not the case for the Chinese carbon market, following the 2017 decision to have benchmark energy intensity targets, not absolute caps, for the allocation of carbon emissions permits to polluters (see IEA 2020). Carbon intensity targets connect emissions allowances to GDP growth, thereby providing shifting goalposts for compliance. Despite the large ceremony and fanfare that accompanied the 2017 announcement, the compliance period for the energy sector only began in 2021, and prices for one tonne of emissions languish at around 50 RMB. Despite the primary coverage for the coal and gas energy sector, long-term roadmaps show the gradual inclusion of further heavy industry sectors, such that a cement factory could be trading with a steel mill, and so forth. As it stands, the Chinese carbon trading system sometimes even acts as a fossil fuel subsidy, as many new coal-fired energy stations fall below the benchmarks and therefore have permits to trade at market prices. The decision against having an absolute cap was ostensibly based on government concerns over producing ‘stranded assets’ of fixed capital in the form of obsolete coal mines and power stations.

The Chinese carbon markets cover corporations that are often state-owned enterprises (SOEs). These are entities that engage in commercial activities on behalf of the state as their owner. Government ownership can vary from direct governmental control, like commercial branches of the state, to enterprises where state actors are the major stockholder but the entity is nonetheless publicly listed. SOEs often dominate sectors necessary for keeping the entire economy running, such as resource extraction, heavy industry, construction, and energy provision. But SOEs often include companies beyond those covered by the carbon markets. Like the early Shanghai stock market (see Hertz 1998), the regional flagship carbon exchanges in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou are joint ventures between local governments and various SOEs involved in finance, energy, oil, and gas (Lo 2016: 62). The same is true of the Shanghai Environment and Energy Exchange that hosts the national market.

Today, state-owned enterprises make up 102 of the largest enterprises across the country, employing some 40 million people, with assets of 50 billion RMB (Wu 2017). However, these companies are often plagued with low profits, high corruption, and oligopolies. Some news sources go so far as to refer to many as ‘zombie companies’ due to overcapacity in production and weakness in profitability

(Wildau 2016). For SOEs, the immediate profit motive and fast cycles of return are not necessarily their most immediate motivation. Instead, their situation often resonates with an argument Ching Kwan Lee (2014) has made regarding Chinese capital investments overseas, particularly in Zambian copper mining. Lee delineates two ideal types of capital with corresponding logics of accumulation: the familiar type is global private capital that maximizes profits for individual shareholders, but the second type is Chinese state capital that encompasses other types of return beyond capital accumulation, such as political stability and access to economic resources. The way many commentators address the use of carbon finance in China's new flagship infrastructural investment policy, One Belt One Road, suggests that this corresponds with China exporting carbon, as well as capital, beyond its borders.

Within the Chinese economy overall, and certainly within carbon markets specifically, various actors and their actual practices are embedded along a state–market continuum. This is not just the result of centralized capacities of the state, but is also due to the three ways that state actors permeate the economy and finance. First, there is the rhizomic character of state departments, bureaus, commissions, and think tanks managing many essential tasks of the economy, including carbon trading, through direct nested links to the government. Second, is the focus of the emissions market on the heaviest industrial polluters dominated by state-owned enterprises. Third, the state participates in China's banking sector, and even stock markets and carbon trading platforms, through state-ownership, joint-stock ownership, and joint ventures.

Contradictions emerge between the desire to reduce emissions and foster a low-carbon economy at the lowest possible cost, and the anxieties over the speculative character of financial instruments. This leads many carbon market actors in China to oscillate uneasily between encouraging a financialized market to determine carbon prices and the state administration prioritizing the stability and predictability of dictating emissions prices in line with related economic priorities of low-carbon growth. This fractures familiar narratives about private accumulation and state redistribution as representative of public interests enshrined in the standard ideology of liberal capitalism. In China, the situation in which the state and state-owned enterprises accumulate capital within a closed circuit lends itself to a theory of public accumulation.

The carbon market allows polluting industries to continue emitting while buying emissions credits, so that the problem of emis-

sions is not necessarily reduced, but simply pushed into the future. This becomes particularly acute when carbon benchmarks are based on historically high, or even artificially inflated, thresholds. In fact, corporations may profit from emissions exchanges when advantageous allocation means that they can trade their surplus credits on the market. For instance, Feiyu,¹ an employee involved in the carbon accounting of a Chongqing energy giant, boasted of the profits the corporation had made after buying into an increasingly diverse energy portfolio, and selling excess emissions credits. Rather than capping emissions on particular industrial facilities, Feiyu explained, the Chongqing emissions exchange had generously allocated emissions credits to energy corporations, frequently leading to high ‘compliance’ rates but also windfall profits for big energy players.

The contradictions surrounding these experiments of a “green transition” set them up to fail, though frequently with the saving grace of increased knowledge surrounding emissions accounting and the workings (or failings) of carbon markets (see Bruckermann 2023). Especially in the wake of the upheavals to production and supply chains catalyzed by Covid-19 since 2020, and the energy insecurity following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many countries have increased emissions-intense coal in their energy mix. In the following ethnographic sites, the formal carbon expertise concocted in global boardrooms suffuses everyday lives on the ground, and reveals the ubiquity of the infiltration of ‘insidious capital’ into the ‘hidden abodes’ including: sites of production that enfold labor exploitation and resource degradation; spaces of the social reproduction that co-constitute individuals and communities; and the workings of nature, where the metabolism of the earth itself becomes an object of exchange and a driver of accumulation (Kalb, Introduction).

As aspirational horizons around social mobility and desperate hopes for environmental redress collide, the specter of ecological destruction hovers above carbon calculations. The instabilities from internal migration and forced displacement as a result of pollution and climate change, as well as widespread unemployment and the devaluation of industrial and agricultural labor, coincide with the Chinese turn toward a postindustrial low-carbon economy. Local events have also brought complications in forging low-carbon landscapes to light: carbon markets incentivizing the construction of new coal facilities; forest fires destroying green mountainsides and displacing local residents; rising energy prices leading to blackouts and protests in landscapes marred by extraction; and the depletion of groundwater in coal operations, as well as anti-desertification carbon

afforestation. This desire for low-carbon landscapes and the devaluation of degraded lives, livelihoods, and environments is particularly notable in Shanxi Province, a central province in Chinese coal country where we turn next.

Forging Low Carbon Lives in Chinese Coal Country

The Chinese carbon trading system does not look likely to push coal out of the energy mix in the foreseeable future. The approval for new coal projects actually increased in 2020. A couple of contributing factors to this have already been discussed: first, the carbon intensity target that connects emissions allowances to economic growth through GDP, rather than instituting an absolute cap on emissions; second, the grandfathering of emissions based on past levels, which rewards increases in efficiency, for instance by building new coal power stations rather than replacing them with renewables. Moreover, while the carbon market may bring the 'externality' of greenhouse gas emissions into corporate balance sheets, it continues to rely on other 'externalities,' for instance the extraction of water needed to produce coal-fired energy. Carbon also acts as anti-value in ways that are harder to trace and grasp, including by wasting landscapes and livelihoods, for instance through forest fires and mine collapses, and even draught and desiccation that have the potential to disrupt life in the region. This section will turn to these processes of 'wasting' landscapes and livelihoods.

In Shanxi, decades of suffering atmospheric pollution and landscape degradation, followed by calls to decarbonize the economy, could result in mine closures and massive layoffs, exacerbating energy austerity amid a landscape marred by extraction. Many residents felt that they not only carried the burden for China's industrialization (in terms of health and labor) but now were potentially sacrificing even their livelihoods to deindustrialization. Yet a contradictory outcome of the emissions exchange was that the construction of newer 'cleaner' coal facilities in the province came to a halt not due to a lack of finances but to a lack of water, placing limits on coal excavation, fuel processing, and energy production. This 'externality' emerged in a region already deemed as wasted, degraded, and devalued by industrialization.

In a region where residents directly and indirectly depend on the coal industry for their economic livelihood, falling from the position as trailblazers of industrialization to the villains of the pollu-

tion crisis was accompanied by two downward trajectories: first, a process of devaluation; and second, a loss of dignity. In this way, it echoes the dual depreciation that Jaume Franquesa describes as a legitimization to the intervention and expansion of capital into ostensibly ‘peripheral’ regions where “certain places and peoples are constructed as waste—residual, barren, marginal, disordered—[so that] capital can justify the need to intervene and make them valuable” (Franquesa 2018).

As Shanxi struggled to decarbonize, residents who suffered from stomach cancers resulting from a diet grown in polluted soils to emphysema of the lungs caused by airborne particulate, began to actively point to degraded landscapes as symptomatic of their loss, from dried riverbeds to discolored sediment. Nonetheless, they often faced ethical dilemmas about their professional and personal involvement in coal, both in their family history and life trajectory. Fangdi, a real estate officer of an energy corporation, and the son of a former coal mining bureau inspector, once indicated to me a hillside hollowed out by mining and blasted for a strip stone quarry, and poignantly asked me: “You think this is a place to study ecological civilization?! Look at that, this is the place to study ecological destruction (*shengtai pohui*).”

With much of the groundwater contaminated or depleted, especially near lucrative coal seams, coal corporations shifted their concern from financial sources to water resources as the main scarcity factor placing a limit on their energy ambitions. The lack of rainfall in recent years had coalesced into worrying conditions for the spread of wildfires in the region, with the remaining forests heavily affected. Visiting Red Mountain village, the entanglement of coal, draught, and extraction entwined in understandings of family history and the local environment. Water in the area had vanished almost completely as mines used up the water underground and rainfall could no longer replenish the depleted resource. The site in the valley basin had once been famed for its production of luxury porcelain, which had all but disappeared as the water reserves dwindled. Driving up a dusty road alongside a snaking dried-out riverbed, we saw the remnants of water mills that once ran on the water gushing and gurgling into the valley. Now the concrete channels snaking up the hillside were dried and cracked from desiccation, yet still led the way to the temple for local water deities.

Before making our way up to the temple in the forested hillside, we passed a checkpoint by the forestry department, with the village’s designated forest guardian (*hulinyuan*) registering us on a formal list

and asking us a series of questions about flammable items we might be carrying, such as lighters, matches, candles, and incense, as a massive forest fire was spreading across a hillside nearby, and the dried forest was at its most vulnerable to fires. He confirmed that the local spring used to bring forth 1 ton of water per second, but now there was none, and every trickle had to be pulled out from the dwindling groundwater. This water was used for the coal industry, ostensibly expanding other industries. Nevertheless, the famed local ceramics factories had to close, and the farmers had to turn from rice to wheat, and increasingly corn, as the land dried up. With the ceramics factories moving increasingly downstream, residents tried to make ends meet by turning to machine production, giving up on the high-end handmade production, as business literally dried up. As the forest guardian summarized: “Villages without water are doomed.”

Later that evening in the nearby mountain village of Sweeping Cliff, Xing, a former industrial worker in a stone quarry, and his wife Sheng, a farmer, discussed the breakneck speed of development in the region. Due to this goal of rapid growth, Xing explained how pollution and safety often fell by the wayside in industrial facilities. Sheng pointed out that this year the family could only plant genetically modified corn. “It’s so dry and hot, there’s no water, no rain,” she said angrily, “so we cannot produce anything for family consumption, only corn to sell.” Their daughter, Sandan, worked at the coal washing station in the valley nearby, though unlike male miners, she did a lot of computer-based calculations in weighing coal and checking its quality. Her classmate pointed out in a cynical commentary that she was “making the big bucks,” poking fun at her paltry salary. However, good jobs beyond the energy sector were hard to come by. Her husband worked as a coal truck driver, which was considered dangerous work due to accidents on the dusty and crumbling roads, but the work was relatively lucrative.

Although Sandan worked in the coal sector, she refused to take up a job with the energy corporation that had dispossessed her family of their courtyard to develop tourism in the village. She was especially critical of this transition as she was particularly close with her paternal grandmother, the now deceased former owner of the family courtyard, for whom the home had been a materialization of her life’s achievements (see Bruckermann 2019: 65–70). Although she worked in the coal sector, Sandan was nonetheless concerned about the environment. For instance, through her individual ‘carbon account’ (*tan zhanghu*) on Alipay’s third-party payment service app, trees were planted in the northern Chinese desert, while, as she pointed out,

trees in Shanxi were burning to the ground. Yet her activism was highly individualized and personal, linked more to her own online life than the global environment. Turning to the people actually planting trees for carbon credits reveals the material immediacies and scarcities produced through these digital transfers in personal carbon accounting.

Rural Green Producers in the Tengger Desert

Throughout China, there are low-carbon projects compensating for urban and industrial pollution by afforesting the countryside. In doing so, forest workers produced emissions credits that were in turn allocated based on the absorption of carbon dioxide in trees and plants. This newly established spatial hierarchy dispossessed some former farmers of their livelihoods in agricultural production as they became cheap labor reserves in a depopulated forest-dedicated countryside, or joined the swelling ranks of precarious wage laborers crowded into increasingly urbanized zones. This phenomenon was exacerbated in Southern China, where the Fujian pilot emissions exchanges set minimum quotas for forestry offsets, and professional carbon companies approach farmers with promises of lucrative land usage conversion deals (see Bruckermann 2020). Although shouldering the manual labor for carbon offsets that promised improved livelihoods from the carbon offset income, rural citizens' capacity to achieve a middle-class position through green production remains questionable.

To engage with the issues of environmental motivation beyond government policy and urban consumers, it is worth turning to a region in Northern China where, at least according to a lead official in the local forestry bureau, "everybody" was engaged in constructing "ecological civilization" and had attained "ecological consciousness" due to environmental hardship. Central Gansu Province, nestled between Inner Mongolia to its north and Qinghai to the south, is a region of illustrious historical prominence along the Northern Silk Road that has recently been heralded as an important point for 'One Belt One Road' development plans across Eurasia. An arid climate of scorching summers and biting winters is compounded with a net loss between precipitation and evaporation. Farmers must irrigate crops or concentrate on draught-resistance plants to wring agricultural products from the silty soil. The sandstorms in the Prefecture of Wuwei have forced the resettlement of 'environmental refugees'



Figure 3.2. A work team reforesting the desert in Gansu Province.
© Charlotte Bruckermann

(*huanjing nanmin*). Further afield, the dustbowl contributes to high levels of particulate matter obscuring the sky as far away as Beijing. The border zones between the oases and the desert have become an expanding target area for ‘sand control afforestation’ (*zhisha zaolin*) (see Zee 2017). A variety of local actors attempt to keep the deserts at bay—most prominently, the forestry and environmental bureaus, but also forestry farms, corporate social responsibility programs, volunteer associations, and even some citizen activists.

The region has gained prominent notoriety through a cautionary campaign as an exemplar of the vagaries of both climate change and desertification. Minqin County, in particular, faces two encroaching deserts, the Tengger and the Badain Jaran, as golden sand dunes threaten cities, towns, and especially smaller villages. The area now serves as an experimental model for anti-desertification interventions, especially since Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visited in 2007 and promised not to let Minqin become a second Lop Nur, a huge lake in nearby Xinjiang autonomous region that was swallowed by the Gobi Desert in the 1970s. In addition to the government campaigns, Alipay’s Ant Forest campaign has put the region on the map in many mobile phone users’ imaginations, as Minqin County in

Gansu and the neighboring Alashan regions of Inner Mongolia have become a vibrant afforestation ground for mobile phone app users.

In August 2016, Alipay introduced carbon accounts for every one of its 450 million users. Complementing their conventional cash and credit accounts, the new carbon accounts track consumers' carbon usage, and match savings with afforestation projects of equivalent carbon value through the mini-app Aliforest. As of May 2018, about 350 million users had clicked into the Aliforest system, with about 40 million becoming hooked on the app. Alipay claims to have planted about 55 million trees and reduced nearly 3 million tonnes of carbon emissions through the app, as well as conserving 2,667 ha (40,000 mu) of protected lands. For their efforts, Alipay has been praised by the communist party and fintech aficionados, even attracting a high-profile collaboration with the UNEP on greening financial technologies. This is also how the region came to my attention, and only upon arrival in 2019 did the realization dawn on me that the whole area had been turned into a place for competitive company plantation projects, as well as a recipient of central state forestry funds, making afforestation a major employment sector.

The actual work of fighting the desert involves planting shrubs and trees to fix the shifting sandbanks. Workers begin stabilizing the sand dunes by laying grids of straw or nylon mesh that can hold the vulnerable and valuable seedlings. After digging holes in the sand, they implant the roots of sturdy bushes, trees, and other draught-resistant vegetation. They then water the seedlings from buckets, usually filled up from a nearby truck, before moving on to the next dune. Despite these precautions, survival rates for these transplants are often low, and depend on what patterns of rainfall, wind, erosion, and temperatures befall the area in the subsequent period.

The labor relations in the afforestation drives depend on the type of project being realized. State-owned forestry farms and forestry bureaus usually employ middle-aged women as manual workers, whose children have usually migrated to urban areas for work or study and whose husbands frequently work as industrial or manual laborers in nearby centers. Most work groups are headed up by a local foreman with forestry training, who manages operations and drives the supply vehicle along the work routes. Investors, such as Alipay's Ant Forest, often channel funds for these projects through more local environmental and forestry foundations, which, in turn, subcontract the actual afforestation to the forestry farms and bureaus. In addition to these large-scale employers, the Wuwei region also hosts various volunteering efforts and grassroots projects

for anti-desert afforestation. A small number of farmers have even taken anti-desertification measures into their own hands.

A family project like this is headed by Zhang Lao-mo who goes by a term of address that is short for *laodong mofan* (i.e., Model Worker Zhang), a designation bestowed upon him by Hu Jintao when he was invited to Beijing for the ceremony honoring him and his fellow ‘servants of the people’ in the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square in the mid-2000s. When we met in 2019, Zhang was a squat and muscular man of fifty-one years, with a tanned face and calloused hands from a lifetime of planting trees in the desert. In the Wuwei District of Liangzhou he organized grassroots afforestation drives in which he acted as a foreman and teacher, depending on whether he was leading his village work team or visitors from nearby urban work units, political associations, or educational institutions.

Zhang felt fighting the desert was his life’s calling, and even as a child agonizingly completing four years of primary school, he was already drawn to manual labor (*laodong*) rather than studying. As a result of his short formal schooling, he considered himself ‘uncultured’ (*meiyou wenhua*). Nonetheless, he claimed great inspiration from, and admiration for, the wisdom of Chairman Mao, whose smiling poster hung above his desk of accolades, to remind him of “The great scholar, who understood both Marx and China, and transformed the masses into a force for the future.” He shared this passion for Maoism with his father, with whom he also played both songs of the desert and the ‘red’ songs of the Cultural Revolution, on matching Chinese spike fiddles, the *erhu*.

Jin, Zhang’s wife, also had a lifelong dedication to keeping the desert at bay. As one of nine children in the same commune as Zhang, she had grown up in a family that also afforested the desert, but in a different brigade from her future husband. Nonetheless, they had known each other their whole lives, and were dedicated to this cause, as well as to each other, from a young age. While they agreed that their lives and behavior followed the recommendations for leading a ‘low carbon life’, Zhang insisted their approach would be more aptly labeled the ‘peasant way of life’ (*nongmin shenghuo*), as it is built on scarcity rather than plenty. Although they received funding from carbon offset mechanisms, the Zhang family was critical of the logic of ‘carbon sinks’ (*tanhui*) to balance urban pollution. While one of their partner organizations, a prominent promoter of corporate carbon projects, came to calculate the CO₂ absorption of their trees and shrubs, the process by which these calculations were made,

and even their outcome in terms of absolute absorption, remained obscure to them.

Despite his ardent enthusiasm for anti-desertification afforestation, Zhang and his family members expressed uncertainty about the alleged aim of combating climate change through forest carbon, as well as the financing for such projects. Indicating to a sign awarded to them as part of an ongoing carbon sink project by a funding foundation, Zhang explained: “Look, the climate (*qihou*) is not our main priority. First, we look after our bodies and our health, and what the benefits there are from improving the environment. Second, we combat the desert, we stop the sand from encroaching and the desert expanding. These are our priorities.”

His father, Zhang Senior, described the process of quantification as one in which the carbon foundation attempted to calculate not just carbon, but labor time and wages. Zhang Senior considered this feat nonsensical in relation to their family’s way of working, which was based on lifelong dedication rather than work hours. Negotiations around the payment for the carbon afforestation with the foundation led to a sustained back and forth, with the eventual outcome that the foundation opted to measure and compensate for the size of the trees. Zhang Senior felt that the limits of calculation should include not just the time spent planting in the dunes, or the trees that resulted from these activities, but the overall costs of sustaining a life in the desert.

His wife, Zhong, agreed, describing an analogy between their approach to planting, growing, and raising trees, and a mother nurturing her children, such that it became impossible to reduce this to quantified value. Moreover, Zhong felt that even the measurements of carbon quantification were misguided, as she pointed out:

Like a mother feeds her children, we go to water the plants, so what this is worth is impossible to say. And while some children grow big and may be taller than others, a mother cannot be responsible for this. She wants them all to survive. With trees in the desert, this is difficult; the low survival rates of trees are not about neglect.

The unspoken implication was that survival in the desert was part of an ongoing livelihood struggle that could not be captured through a quantified carbon analogy, nor compensated through wages. Instead, it was part of an ongoing fight to safeguard extended families, with the analogies between seedlings and children.

Individual and Household Carbon Accounting

The government's recognition of environmental imperatives echoes increasingly vehement ecological demands by Chinese citizens as they struggle to maintain their lives and livelihoods despite stifling air, soil, and water pollution, but who nonetheless aspire to middle-class lifestyles. Individual and household carbon accounting have spread throughout the country in recent years, increasingly tying ordinary citizens into emissions exchanges, sometimes even involuntarily. Experimenting politically, Guangdong governments have developed and piloted household carbon accounts across a variety of sites through an online application called Inclusive Carbon, including by tapping into data collection for utilities from the lowest form of governance, neighborhood associations, and issuing a carbon currency that can be exchanged for local goods and services as rewards for ecological behavior. Other mobile phone applications enable users to balance their personal emissions through buying into the same forest and energy 'offset' projects that large corporations use to cancel their emissions debt through emissions credits.

These carbon schemes do not take users to task for carbon actually emitted, but rather reward them for alleged emissions reductions, calculated by subtracting their activities from hypothetical baselines. The calculative mechanism thereby actually reduces their responsibility, rather than their emissions, through an imagined, fictive fantasy of carbon savings. The fetishization of CO₂ in climate science and in environmental policy in the last three decades has contributed to this contradictory apportioning and removal of responsibility by wedding cybernetic fantasies and neoliberal proselytizing (see Bruckermann 2022). In particular, current behavior, including carbon-emitting activities by corporations and individuals, is potentially elevated as a bearer of value that can be traded for profit, leading to analogies with other forms of waste (see Peña Valderrama 2023).

These contradictions are not lost upon the users and creators of these schemes and apps. Experts who tracked, traced, and traded emissions rights, and reflected upon the fictive nature of their calculations, often treated the data generated by the creation of carbon inventories and carbon accounting as potentially valuable for future decarbonizing efforts. Never mind that they do not deliver on actual reductions in the present. These temporal deferrals of ecological redress align with promises of the technological fix that validates current behavior, even carbon-emitting forms of transport, energy, and consumption.

Users of Alipay app described high levels of addiction, competition, and satisfaction from using the gamified carbon app, while experiencing guilt and gratitude for the capacity to participate in the ‘distance environmentalism’ the app provides. As Nianzhen, a recent university graduate and dedicated Aliforest user described: “When I see my [virtual, digital] tree grow I definitely feel some fleeting pleasure, and when I look at the [actual] trees that have been planted in the desert I also get a bit of pride. When friends make off with my energy, I get a bit sulky. I know it’s kind of embarrassing. At least I’m not alone in this addiction (*yintou*).” However, the true addiction was described by a carbon-footprinting specialist as the growing spiral between emissions production and consumer spending through the e-commerce platforms:

In these schemes you buy things and earn carbon credits, so actually this encourages more consumption, so . . . so there’s a kind of . . . I shouldn’t say this. . . well, there’s a kind of irony to this, that earning credits by consuming more is contradictory to the effort. The same basic debate appears with Inclusive Carbon as a platform that runs commercially and sells products to keep users on their social and financial platforms [like Alipay’s Ant Forest]. Transactions happen on the platform, encouraging manufacturers to sell and users to buy [the green products], so you get this elevation of consumption.

The carbon-footprinting apps highlight some sources of greenhouse gases, while diverting or concealing others. Moreover, it incentivizes consumption, as long as it can be accounted for as ‘green.’ This incentivizing function was a matter of concern for Aike, communications manager for the state-backed Inclusive Carbon scheme. He was even more explicit about what would be necessary for individual carbon caps to take effect:

To be truly effective, we would have to divide up the rights to emit carbon much more strictly. This would be like the past times of resource scarcity (*ziyuan kuifā*). You know, like in the [Great Leap Forward] famine years [in 1959 and 1961], when people had so little that they were forced by necessity to calculate, budget, and divide their food, giving portions to each member of the household, under conditions of extreme hardship.

While visions of environmental apocalypse frequently appear integral to capitalism, capitalist responses, such as the carbon coin schemes, frame these disasters and their solution from within. The individual carbon coin platform, much like corporate carbon accounting and emissions inventories, hide the environmental destruction of production, realization, and circulation of value within capitalism.

It does so by emulating the money fetish with a carbon fetish (c.f. Swyngedouw 2010). By quantifying and abstracting the environmental 'cost' through carbon calculations, social relations around emissions debt and credit become obscured, in parallel to those of carbon markets. Thereby, claims on natural resources become packaged as salable rights to destruction, the basic essence of carbon emissions trading, and then become folded back onto producers and consumers, the logic underlying individual carbon accounting (c.f. Dalsgaard 2013). Individual carbon accounting thereby brings carbon as a 'metric of the human' into sharp relief (Whittington 2016), while simultaneously connecting the citizen-subject to a state project of carbon as value.

By incentivizing virtual shopping, the carbon-footprinting apps stage and celebrate the circulation of value, while simultaneously assuaging users' guilt over an emerging green conscience. Although the carbon coins appear as 'low carbon' units of self-regulation, they actually enfold state aims of decarbonization into quantifiable, cheap, and exchangeable tokens. Carbon coins do more than foster a neoliberal subjectivity of docility and self-reliance by tying state promises of an 'ecological civilization' to citizen-led environmental redress, as the state thereby draws political legitimacy from local attempts to foster 'low carbon life' and bolsters claims of the instantiation of the coming low-carbon era in the national, and even global, arena.

Conclusion: Carbon as Value and Anti-value

What do you mean, you are researching carbon as value, carbon is anti-value!

—Edward, research and development officer for
China National Offshore Oil Corporation

If capital is value in motion, what is carbon doing? A misleading carbon 'theory of value' rests on the assumption of nature as simultaneously outside of, yet analogous to, capitalism. According to this logic, nature as 'outside' of capitalism bears ineffable 'value' that is not subject to the laws of capital and accumulation. At times, even carbon is championed as an alternative measure of value beyond the metrics of capital, despite its intended purpose of making polluters pay. Simultaneously, nature as 'outside' capitalism is blamed for making nature problematically disappear as an 'externality' in capitalist accounting, leading to its exploitation and destruction.

This frames nature's position outside of capitalism as the reason for ecological destruction, in a revamped 'tragedy of the commons' argument projected onto planetary pollution and fossil fuel addiction. The solution, according to carbon logics, is that nature, and its destruction, must be *brought into* the capitalist system. This is where carbon, and the monetizing of carbon, comes in. In short, the carbon 'theory of value' positions nature as analogous to capitalism, yet generative of non-capitalist value, and capitalism as the solution for saving nature.

Carbon logics subsume environmental processes to capitalist logics, and place faith in capitalism to save nature. While carbon is supposed to bring environmental degradation into economic calculations, carbon markets, in effect, often relocate ecological repercussions outside of their spatial limits or national borders, or defer them temporally into an uncertain future, thereby compounding climate risks. In situations where carbon logics break down, struggles over value arise. In critiquing a contradictory carbon 'theory of value,' resistances to the realization, circulation, and accumulation of value emerge through the potentially catalyzing effect of carbon that may culminate in revolts of living labor and nature.

In China the carbon metric has spread into the entire economic system, simultaneously facilitating and threatening the realization of value. Carbon allows investment into production and the continuity of growth in consumption, deferring this problem of the potential annihilation of value into the future, or outside its geographic boundaries. This is where 'anti-value' accumulates and generates potential antagonism. Value and anti-value have a temporal dimension as carbon's value is created immediately upon investment but takes time to realize, and threatens to reach an untenable tipping point and turn into 'anti-value.'

David Harvey (2018) argues that 'anti-value' hovers over the contradictory unity of production and realization of value in capitalism, as a potentially permanent disruptive force. For Harvey, a key example for anti-value is credit. Credit smooths over divergent turnover times of capital between different industries, so debt circulates in the credit system as interest-bearing capital—until it does not. And then the whole system grinds to a halt, and effects like the financial crisis ensue. Another example Harvey cites is labor, and how it allows value generation within the system of production. However, when labor is withheld, for instance in strike action or other refusals to work, it becomes anti-value embodied.

Carbon, like credit, allows economic growth to continue through temporal deferral and spatial displacement, despite environmental

risks. When carbon commensurability fails to deliver on promises for the smooth circulation and endless accumulation of capital, it can similarly morph into an anti-value that reorients personal and political projects—for instance, by disrupting future production or threatening living conditions. The constant deferral of the Chinese carbon market, or even how the carbon apps allow bubbles to hover endlessly over unfulfilled green action, reveal this tension. In addition to temporal deferral, value and anti-value also have a geographic dimension of displacement because the cost of ‘externalities’ of ecological degradation are displaced into other countries as an outside of carbon exchanges—for instance, as afforestation in China is paralleled with timber imports from other countries or regions.

Experiences of Chinese citizens, from seasonal pollution and sporadic sandstorms to deforestation and even desertification in times of climate change, cause harms that are difficult to evaluate in quantitative terms, whether through chains of causation with carbon emissions or in terms of the economic damages caused in monetary prices. The value or destruction of value that these crises lay waste to in their path clearly exceed the parameters of such calculations, from bodily suffering to the loss of dignity, or desolate land to inhospitable climates, where life struggles to reproduce.

The Chinese turn toward a postindustrial low-carbon economy coincides with instabilities from internal migration and forced displacement because of pollution and climate change, as well as widespread unemployment and the devaluation of industrial labor. As state-owned energy players profit from further emissions, coal corporations diversified their energy mix due to dwindling water supplies in degraded landscapes. Moreover, imbalances of carbon accounting brought to light how economic calculations clashed with logics of sustainability and survival among farmers planting carbon offset trees in the desert, while computer programmers found themselves caught in the logics of fetishized carbon coins. These cases shed light on how contestations around value could ultimately disrupt business-as-usual, and flip carbon into an anti-value to disrupt endless growth and foster political resistance.

A contradictory melding of value, in the abstract political economy sense as the driver of accumulation, and values, in the experiential, ethical, and affective sense of belonging, judging and aspiring, emerge in the carbon metric. Value in neither sphere can fully contain the other, yet neither realm of value generates an outside beyond the other, as the contradictions of capitalism suffuse both value and

values with ‘insidious capital’ and ‘intimate contradictions’ (Kalb, this volume). The quantified carbon metric and its twinned monetary price cannot capture or contain the environmental degradation, loss of livelihood, or dwindling of resources that sustain living labor and nature. Arguably, by entrenching the infiltration of the logics of capital, via the vehicle of carbon, into the ‘hidden abodes’ of production, reproduction, and nature, carbon exacerbates relational class struggles throughout. Yet resolving the current ecological crisis, with climate and carbon at its center, is not a matter of expanding this metric or paying nature for services in sustaining work, reproduction, and life. This is a clash between value and values that the carbon metric sutures, but cannot resolve.

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Note

1. All names and some minor identifying information of individuals have been altered to protect anonymity throughout the chapter, unless otherwise requested by the research participants involved.

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— Chapter 4 —

ENCLOSING GURUGRAM

Vernacular Valorization on India's Urban Frontline

Tom Cowan



Introduction

This chapter examines struggles over land commodification on India's agrarian–urban frontier. The rural edges of Indian cities have been sites of a feverish land frenzy over the past two decades, as developers, investment funds, local state officials, and industrialists all vie to revalorize 'under-utilized' rural landholdings, and convert them into urban and industrial real estate. Here on the urban frontier, peasant proprietors are throwing themselves into land markets—informally cutting plots, constructing roads, improvising titles, and exploiting customary tenures in order to take part in India's dramatic urban awakening. While narratives of land 'grabs' and dispossession in India have tended to focus on state-led land acquisition programs on the urban frontier these grand state plans are accompanied by far more pervasive bureaucratic and material struggles to mobilize agrarian class power and land's material flexibility to quietly claim land.

Since the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, and further deregulation of the real estate sector in the 2000s, the Indian state has sought to open up the Indian countryside for real estate and industrial expansion. From the aggressive marketing of rural land banks, creation of public–private investment vehicles, smart city investment policies, mega-infrastructure development programs, special economic zones (SEZs), and deregulatory planning

environments, the state has sought to provide outlets to real estate capital locked up in oversaturated city centers and facilitate the real estate sector's capture and transformation of rural land (Denis and Zérah 2017; Goldman 2011; Searle 2016). The post-liberalization rush on rural land forms the foundation of a broader political economic shift across India. Real estate-led urbanization, and struggles over emerging rentier economies, have come to shape fledgling, if uneasy, caste-class alliances emerging from the post-agrarian order. The mass urbanization of India's peri-urban and rural areas—of 'smart cities,' special economic zones, and mega-highways—is not only a response to attempts to reconfigure rural space for global capital, but simultaneously reflects a much broader hegemonic move on behalf of the Indian state to forge alliances between land-hungry corporate capital and cash-rich agrarian propertied classes, which form the basis of an increasingly chauvinistic and authoritarian politics across the country (Balakrishnan 2019; Cowan 2022).

Indeed, the geographies of this fledgling hegemonic alliance are laid bare in the vernacular and incomplete character of property regimes across the country. Amidst growing legal and political opposition to state-brokered land dispossessions that have stalled development projects and brought down political dynasties,¹ the Indian state has rowed back from dirigisme,² and moved toward a model of facilitating private sector-led land aggregation and development policies. While the period running from early 1990s to the mid-2000s may have been characterized by violent state-brokered land deals (see Steur and Das 2009; Sarkar and Chowdhury 2009), in the contemporary moment regimes of dispossession go under the quieter guise of 'alienation,' enacted incrementally within local bureaucratic spaces, *panchayat* (village council) meetings and roadside brokerage offices. Today's urban periphery is characterized less by stand-offs between heroic villagers and state bulldozers, and more frequently by a frenzy of land brokers, aggregators, and developers—drawn from the agrarian landowning classes and mobilizing agrarian institutions—to convert heterogeneous rural property regimes into globally integrated real estate.

This switch in the state's approach to land development was pioneered in Gurugram,³ a city 20 km southwest of New Delhi, where I have been conducting fieldwork since 2012. Transformed from an agro-pastoral hinterland of New Delhi in the 1980s to a privately managed and globally integrated urban center of 2 million people today, Gurugram was—until recently—heralded as a model for a new urban India⁴ characterized by private sector-led urban and



Figure 4.1. Gurugram land evaluation. © Tom Cowan

infrastructural development, and privatized urban and industrial governance.

The government of Haryana's neoliberal urban development model developed in the early 1980s sharply contrasted with that in neighboring Delhi, where housing and development controls were tightly policed by the Delhi state development authority. Real estate firms fleeing state land controls in Delhi were attracted to the liberalized development environment in the foothills of south Delhi, adjacent to the Delhi International Airport. What is more, by chance Gurugram was situated in an area with no acting authority to enforce the redistributive land ceiling regulations introduced across India in the 1970s (Gururani 2013). This enabled land-hungry developers to amass land banks through private sales with agrarian landowners⁵ on a scale previously considered impossible. For their part, the landowning Jat and Ahir caste communities, who dominate land-ownership and party politics in the state of Haryana, sold their land and became cash rich and willing partners in the quickly evolving land markets.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the story of Gurugram's urbanization is pointedly not one of mass dispossessions, but rather of hegemonic alliance between agrarian landowners and corporate capital (Cowan 2018). At a time when state governments were still dispossessing landowners, 'brokering' land for real estate capital (Levien 2013) and attempting to establish territorial 'zones of exemption' (Cross 2010), Gurugram stood as a showpiece of what was possible under a neoliberal urban future, where a provincial propertied class

might by turned to revalorize and assetize their fields (Birch and Muniesa 2020).

These alliances are far from smooth, however, and it has required constant work to translate agrarian social structures, territorial claims, and political and tenurial institutions into capitalist urban forms. Gurugram's agrarian-urban landscape is as such characterized by a patchwork of differently privatized and non-privatized property, rentier and commodity-producing economies, and urban and rural lands—testaments to the compromised hegemonic geographies of agrarian urbanization. Building on recent work on India's decidedly agrarian-inflected urbanization (Chari 2004; Cowan 2018, 2022; Gururani and Dasgupta 2018; Rathi 2020), this chapter is interested in the social work required to repurpose rural class structures, political networks, and property regimes for property-led urbanization.

A hallmark of urbanization across the Global South from the 1990s has been the aggressive extension of private property rights in the countryside. In echoes of Hernando de Soto's work on land titling, the Indian government espouse private property titles as a cure for all manner of rural social and economic ills, and have rolled out an aggressive marketing campaign that sells a vision of post-agrarian futures bound intimately to private property ownership, urban development, and rentier accumulation. And yet agrarian land on India's urban frontier is no *terra nullius*, it carries a recursive history, subject to colonial, then postcolonial land enclosure and resistance that has left a complex layering of rights, exclusions, and jurisdictions that must be traversed and flattened in pursuit of private property. Across Gurugram, landowners are readying their land for real estate capture—cutting plots, hedges, and walls on the ground, and arranging paperwork and property boundaries in bureaucratic records often in lieu of formal state recognition. These kinds of expectant strategies are akin to what Jeremy Campbell, in his work in the Brazilian Amazonia, has called 'vernacular property-making,' a process whereby peasants 'turn land into a proto-commodity awaiting recognition by the state' through a variety of improvised means (Campbell 2014). In this chapter, I look to build on Campbell's work to explore the ways both corporate real estate firms and agrarian landowners on Gurugram's edges look to mobilize opaque bureaucratic structures and customary landholdings to settle 'vernacular' property claims. These claims often sit outside the formal planning and development procedures of the state, but nevertheless align with a broader political economic imaginary of

a propertied and urban frontier led by politically dominant landowning caste communities.

Flexing Land

Converting rural land on the edges of Indian cities into standardized private property parcels is a complex endeavor, one that involves the careful assembly of the material instruments of property: possession documents, land-use permissions, cadastral maps, land records, survey stones, and boundary walls. While typically understood as resolute instruments of state calculation, legibility, and expertise (Blomley 2003) on India's urban frontier, these bureaucratic materials—embedded in local institutional politics—confer ambiguity and flexibility in land. Not only can maps be quietly redrawn and documents rewritten, but beneath these authoritative materials are a set of competing political claims and struggles that come to substantiate property (see Hall, Hirsch and Li 2011). As will be shown on Gurugram's periphery, pliable maps and diverse tenures are deployed by real estate actors to extend territorial ambiguity, bypass regulations, and commodify rural land. These vernacular property-making strategies are not undertaken outside of, or in competition with, the mainstream cartographic practices of the state, but rather permeate and overlap with lower-level state spaces, logics, and strategies of land governance. As discussed by Roy (2003) on India's urban frontier, the state frequently exercises its power through strategies of 'unmapping.' In Roy's account, the absence of formal sight gives scope for the state to flexibly remap and vest property with rural poor vote banks. Here I am interested in how remapping strategies are not simply the privilege of the state but, within the current neoliberal conjuncture, are also creatively deployed by the real estate sector.

These strategies, I argue, are deployed in (at least) three ways. First, property claiming is animated within bureaucratic spaces and practices. The map, grid, and registry, while typically viewed as technologies of abstraction that substantiate the calculative territoriality of state power at the urban frontier, are pliable, earthbound materials that are flexibly put to work to authorize both private sector and landowners' land banks. Bound up in the map and the record book are unmapped property claims and malleable materials through which land can shift in location and contort in size. As will be shown, within the offices of low-level bureaucracy and out

on cadastral land surveys, private actors manipulate the silences of the map and grid to redraw boundary lines, muddy titles, and conjure up property claims. Importantly, attention to contestation over bureaucratic materials politicizes the work of the bureaucracy. It is the disaggregated space of the local state, with its competing interests and constituents, and the pliable materiality of maps, registries, and lists (Hull 2012) that animate flexibility in land and produce ambiguity in state records that can be utilized by those seeking enclosure.

Second, these processes are enabled by ambivalences in local property regimes. Differential forms of land tenure, I argue, frequently act as accomplices to commodification, allowing private actors to exploit the openness of tenures to assert property claims. These ambivalences are in part authored within bureaucratic spaces previously discussed, but are also the outcomes of historical agrarian class struggles that have marked rural property regimes with hybrid private–nonprivate tenures. This chapter will show how differently privatized tenures on the peripheries of the city of Gurugram have allowed private actors to colonize the commons and extend the commodification of land.

Finally, land's flexibility allows real estate actors to physically take possession of land imbued with malleable boundaries and ambiguous tenures, and suture them to official state visions and plans for real-estate-led urbanization. On the urban frontier, a whole host of private actors—brokers, aggregators, developers, state actors—are pitching fences, digging trenches, building on plots in order to substantiate facts on the ground, often in lieu of claiming a legal title.⁶ These autoconstructions, materialized in the incremental development of roads, housing complexes, and even special economic zones, derive authority from aligning with hegemonic ideological, and material norms that hold together the neoliberal developmentalism of the Indian state. The fixing of facts on the ground profoundly reorganizes land's territorial landscape and offers a pathway toward future regularization. Importantly, it is land's flexibility, the ability to physically reorganize territory on the ground and on paper, that allows these strategies to take place. Vernacular property-making strategies do not exist in a political-economic vacuum; these locally contingent practices articulate with local class struggles over land value and nationally hegemonic forces of real-estate-driven economic growth, which render sensible otherwise illicit property claims.

These three property-claiming strategies—bureaucratic malle-

ability, ambivalent land tenure, and practices of possession—are not marginal to processes of land dispossession driving real estate development across India’s urban frontier. These strategies are not peculiarities to an otherwise smooth unfolding of the commodity logic in land—rather, they represent its internal animating features, providing capital with the requisite space to maneuver mixed land tenures, agrarian institutions, and postcolonial regulations in its quest to realize private property. In short, the translation of dynamic land regimes into forms that can cleanly command value, requires flexibility and ambivalence. These processes are complex and deeply contested, marked by territorial holdouts, land scams, high-stakes negotiations, and a host of bureaucratic struggles over the capture of land. These uneasy alliances between the customary and formal, the agrarian and urban, are held together by speculative visions of perpetually increasing land prices, buttressed more recently by Modi’s neoliberal Hindutva project that sutures ethnoreligious and caste supremacy to projects of accumulation.

The arguments explored here as such repose the bureaucratic office, cadaster, and field as contested ‘frontlines of value’ (Kalb, Introduction), where mainstream forces of value-seeking enclosure entangle with and appropriate localized property regimes. On the edges of Gurugram, it is corporate real estate actors and state officials who are seeking to wield connections with local officials and territorial ambiguities in order to craft land into a recognizably investable resource. Land’s flexibility, I argue, is a vital element of capitalist enclosure on the urban frontier.

Uncertain Dispossession

Harvey’s (2003) work on ‘accumulation by dispossession’ has been incredibly influential in scholarly understandings of contemporary dispossession and capitalist expansion. Harvey’s principal innovation was to dispose of the historicisms that tied Marx’s ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ to the foundations of capitalist transitions, and its particular feature as a precondition of waged labor. For Harvey, contemporary land dispossessions are ongoing, central features of capital’s reproduction and expansion, typically deployed to capture and revalorize underutilized—but not noncapitalist—landholdings.

Harvey’s accumulation by dispossession extends beyond land-based dispossession and explores a whole host of enclosures of

private and socialized assets: from water to health-care systems to public housing. For Harvey (2003), capital survives shocks of over-accumulation by rerouting surpluses into socialized resources—a rerouting that, in the Global North at least, has required the ideological, institutional, and political apparatus of neoliberalism.

In an appraisal of Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, Mike Levien convincingly argues that while Harvey's concept usefully unmoors land dispossession from historicist analyses of capitalist origins, and severs its strict links to proletarianization, the concept remains ambiguously defined, and overextended to describe diverse forms of surplus absorption that are already characterized by expanded reproduction (Levien 2015). For Levien, accumulation by dispossession's utility resides in its exploration of the "deeply political processes in which owners of the means of coercion transparently redistribute assets from one class to another" (Levien 2015: 149). In other words, for Levien the distinguishing feature of contemporary rounds of dispossession under advanced capitalism is state force. This account forms part of a broader body of work that crucially understands land-based dispossessions as a political process driven as much by class struggle as the functional movements of overaccumulated capital (*ibid.*; De Angelis 2001)

And yet, as discussed at the outset of this chapter, in contemporary India, land notified for forceful state acquisition accounts for a small proportion of overall transactions. Indeed, despite a throng of state-orchestrated infrastructural and urban development projects across the mid-2000s, very few of these projects have moved past the notification stage. If once state-led dispossessions facilitated quick access to rural land for private investors hesitant to engage in aggregating fragmented smallholdings, today the real estate sector has proven adept at developing infrastructures to navigate these obstacles and directly engage in land dispossessions and enclosures. In this context the state plays a facilitatory role, flexibly master-planning territories, fast-tracking land use permissions, deregulating planning norms (Gururani 2013), and overseeing the real estate sector's piecemeal aggregation and conversion of land (Cowan 2022). Indeed, much of the politics of land enclosure and dispossession in rural India rests not in the deployment of unilateral state coercion but rather in quieter material strategies of remapping land, reassigning tenures, adjusting records, and informally plotting land. On the urban frontier at least, it is the private sector that is carrying the bulk of the work to capture and convert land into a real estate asset.

In this regard, the frontlines of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ on India’s highly sought-after urban peripheries are not necessarily enacted unilaterally by state force, but rather unfold unevenly and without certainty through the interlacing of global capital with customary rural property regimes and agrarian communities. That is not to say that state development plans or territorial engagements are unimportant, rather that they are mediated through a lively, material politics of land, and bureaucratic indeterminacy engaged in by a multiplicity of local actors.

Disrupting Calculation

Attempts to scrutinize the foundations of private property regimes across the world have focused on the state’s deployment of technologies—maps, cadastral surveys, title registries—to not only produce tradable assets of property in land, but to materially substantiate private property’s territoriality. The deployment of these technologies in North India have however had mixed results. Under colonial rule the will to impose private property regimes was consistently resisted and compromised by class conflict and disaggregation *within* rural communities, resulting in diverse tenurial regimes that mix proprietary claims with commoning (see Bhattacharya 2019). Put simply, the rollout of private property regimes—from authoritarian colonial rule to the developmentalist policies of the postindependence period—has been uneven, disputed and marked by compromise between rule and custom (*ibid.*). In the contemporary moment, the requirement to govern diverse tenurial and political constituencies has produced forms of state power that are, as a wealth of scholarship attests, expressed as much by appeal to opacity and flexibility, as to standardization and code (Anand 2015; Anjaria 2011; Chatterjee 2004; Kaviraj 1984). This flexibility extends to bureaucratic materials themselves—as we shall see, many of the calculative instruments deployed by the state to discipline territory and impose normative forms of private property (the grid, the map, etc.) loosen in the dusty offices of the local state. Here bureaucrats in charge of orchestrating private property, oversee the redrawing of maps, the disassembly of grids, and the rewriting of claims. As Matthew Hull has written, on the ground bureaucratic materials act as unfaithful tools of government. This bureaucratic malleability and tenurial diversity fundamentally structure local

territorial power, and the pathways to the assembly of rural land as a standardized commodity.

Against narratives that bestow the master plan, cadastral survey, and land grid with unrelenting and calculative power to dispose of land, this chapter is interested in their ontological insecurity, in the power that ambiguity affords real estate actors to contort land boundaries, reinterpret land tenures, and settle processes of urban development. These contingent practices, of course, mirror global processes of enclosure and 'value grabbing' (Andreucci et al. 2017) that operate through improvised and flexible territorial practices. In India, the utility that ambiguity affords acts as a powerful resource to private actors at a time when state governments are increasingly moving away from directly brokering land through state-enforced land acquisitions, and toward orchestrating regulatory environments that allow developers to directly purchase, aggregate, and develop land on their own terms. The absence of an examination of the contested material deployment of calculative instruments and tenurial regimes in studies of land enclosure and dispossession not only fails to attend to the contingent routes by which real estate markets are established, but also tends to presuppose the certainty of land's inevitable capitalization merely by the presence of the map, title deed, and boundary wall.

The arguments presented here are intended as a modest contribution to a body of work that seeks to center the material struggles of capital's global pursuit of land. As Solomon Benjamin writes, progressive scholarship is often quick to view land politics through a lens of conflict and resistance that "flattens and closes over various political spaces" and bypasses the "multiple logics of territorial formation" that shape claims to real estate surpluses (Benjamin 2019: 2). Following Benjamin, I am interested in the ways actors make territorial claims by embedding their claims in disaggregated, bureaucratic institutions and ambiguous property regimes. In order to understand processes of private property-making on India's urban frontier requires an understanding of how diverse systems of tenure and ownership, which exist under malleable regulatory and territorial regimes, continue to act as a key resource for those seeking to capture, aggregate, and convert land into real estate.

There have been numerous concepts developed within scholarship on urban development in the Global South that have sought to get at the incremental, tenurial, or resurrectionary ways the urban poor in particular make territorial and institutional claims (Bayat 2000; Benjamin 2019). Elsewhere the anthropological literature on

'frontiers,' unhappy with the universalist tones of primitive accumulation, have explored a series of ways in which rural communities have been engaged in parceling and enclosing land, and making normative claims to property. The 'vernacular property-making' of settlers and colonists in rural Amazonia, writes Campbell (2014: 240), "can be viewed as vital, if poorly understood, components of emerging processes of accumulation and dispossession on resource frontiers." His exploration of colonists cutting trails, forging documents, and pitching fences in Brazil's rural Amazonia forms part of a broader body of work that examines how local communities anticipate the march of capitalist expansion by crafting provisional and tentative property claims on capitalist frontiers (Li 2014). Here the expansion and circulation of capital via property is substantiated not only by the forceful material technologies of the state, but equally by a commonly felt certainty of propertied futures.

On the edges of Gurugram, territorial and tenurial ambiguity, anchored by histories of uneven colonial property settlement, form the central means through which developers seek to capture and convert rural lands. As Benjamin (2005: 251) writes, postcolonial tenure arrangements provide land with a "powerful fluidity" that disrupts its otherwise fixed materiality. Accounting for property's 'fluid' and uncertain materiality rejects accounts of capitalist enclosure that would position a coherent binary between a dispossessive, calculative capitalist state and a resisting, 'vernacular' rural community.

In this sense, parallels can be made with recent scholarship on labor informality and capitalist exploitation. Just as capital is parasitic of, and differently exploits, so-called 'informal' labor (S. Campbell 2020), so too do the mechanisms of land capture and enclosure frequently operate through the exploitation of opaque customary land tenures, pliable state actors and informal territorial strategies. The route to land's translation as a value-bearing commodity is as such contingent on, and often enabled by, non-normative property regimes. If, as Inverardi-Ferri (2018) writes, "accumulation by dispossession serves to colonize spaces of informality and to integrate them into different territories of market discipline," I would argue that this process of often requires the capacity to wield territorial and regulatory ambiguity.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore how private actors look to exploit land's material and representational ambiguity in order to aggregate land and settle property claims. I will do so by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Gurugram conducted

between 2018 and 2019 in the offices of the land revenue bureaucracy (*Patwari*), which is responsible for registering and mapping rural property ownership across the outskirts of the city.

Digging for Land

Neeraj was sat waiting for the senior land revenue bureaucrat to return from court when we met at Gurugram's central Patwari office. "This work requires patience and some intelligence" he remarked, tapping his head as we scoured a draft copy of a new master plan he had accessed through a friend in the local planning department. Neeraj worked as a 'liaisoner' for the Gurgaon-based real estate firm M3M, who have acquired over 2,000 acres of land across the city since 2007, developing a range of high-end residential and commercial developments, including the 600-foot under-construction Trump Towers. M3M, which refers to 'Men, Material and Money,' have also been at the center of a range of alleged scandals over the past decade, including accusations of tax evasion, illegally clearing forest lands for development, and utilizing political connections to fast-track property registration and development projects.

Neeraj's job was to sit and wait in the low-level offices of the Haryana land revenue department (hereafter, Patwari, responsible for the registration, transfer, partition, and mapping of rural property) and facilitate the movement of project paperwork and approvals through the office. While computerization of this department over the past decade has transferred many of these processes to computer operators (Goswami et al. 2017), the field offices of the Patwari remain key shadow sites for the exploration, negotiation, and aggregation of land parcels prior to their registration through the online system. If, for decades, Patwaris—themselves institutions of colonial land settlement—drew their incomes from the authority of the office to facilitate or blockade land conversions, today they trade in their ongoing powers to partition rural property parcels, their intimate knowledge of complex rural land tenures and claims, and their control of the paper histories of rural property. As Manoj, a young assistant Patwari, explained to me, the revenue bureaucrat has two principal roles, the first of which is overseeing everyday village administration. The Patwari offices are at all times busily occupied by village members seeking all manner of documentation, from proof of land ownership, to debt, marriages, and incomes. This work pays little and is typically tasked to young apprentices in the office like

Manoj. But overseeing the registration, mapping, and mutation of rural property is a Patwari's main source of income, with fees being charged for the speed, the size, and the potential controversy of the work involved. Within office conversations, these two registers of work—village administration and property work—are lightly satirized through reference to the term '*naukarshah*,' the Hindi word for bureaucrat, which when broken into its constituent parts means 'servant' (*naukar*) and 'king' (*shah*). When authorizing paperwork, Patwaris refer to themselves as 'servants' of the village. But when facilitating property mutations, they become 'kings' of development (Cowan 2022).

Neeraj had previously worked in the office himself, informally hired as an assistant Patwari for fifteen years, and he now formed part of an army of private actors who sit within the bureaucratic office day in, day out. The vast majority of these actors are drawn from dominant agrarian caste-communities—the Jats and the Ahirs—whose caste identities were bound to property-ownership under colonial land settlement policy (Cowan 2022), and who as a result have an intimate connection to the institutional and politico-economic life of land in the region. The job of the liaisoner, who sometimes referred to themselves as 'company Patwaris,' was not simply to use their connections within the office to expediate paperwork, but also to use their access to state records and their intimate knowledge of the daily workings of the office to gain insights and clues as to potential movements in the city's land market. Who was buying what and where? Where were the state planners acquiring land? What were the rates? And in which direction might the master plan be expanded.

I sat and waited with Neeraj that day to request a senior Patwari to partition a series of small plots of land in an area south of the city. When one buys agricultural land in Gurugram, it is usually a 'share' within a larger co-owned landholding. Consolidation programs, brought in under the East Punjab Holdings (Consolidation and Prevention of Fragmentation) Act of 1948 (hereafter, the Holdings Act), intended to remedy the scourge of fragmented, rural smallholdings that were the antithesis of the postindependence government's developmentalist agenda. This included the ambitious Intensive Agricultural Development Programme (IADP), more popularly known as the 'Green Revolution,' that required a territorially gridded landscape, and large areas of cultivatable land. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Holdings Act reorganized en masse the majority of the Punjab countryside into 43,560 square-foot rectangles in a

remarkable feat of representational enclosure. Consolidation fundamentally altered the territorial and legal substance of property, as it involved laying down fences, digging trenches, maneuvering hills, and creating ponds. As the field manuals of land consolidators attest (Planning Commission 1958), this was a project of valorization—of how to value and convert highly divergent lands (in terms of soil type, productivity, irrigation, improvements, location) into something standardizable and effortlessly exchangeable. Consolidators were engaged in pricing trees, ponds, bunds, and hills that could be exchanged in the process of repackaging land. This process reposed land as a strictly financial asset, one that could accrue rents and command value, and it was under these conditions that land was repackaged as private property in favor of existing landowners.

While consolidation fundamentally reorganized the formal representation of property in state records, it did *not* necessarily alter the way landowners owned, used, and traded land. Perhaps due to persistent pushback from landowners and tenants who favored existing systems of jointly and commonly owned property, the practice of holding ‘shares’ in land remains a predominant mode of landownership and possession across the state. A landowner will, for example, own numerous ‘shares’—some in possession, some not—in fragmented parts of the village. Today, the shareholding practice reinscribes the fragment into the picture of geometric consolidation. The inclusion of hundreds of thousands of fragmented land uses and claims into the land revenue maps would, according to state officials I spent time with, disturb the geometric integrity of the map; as such, the territorial details of land shares (their location and contours within the rectangle), while recorded textually in land record books, would not be mapped out on state cadastral maps. There exist almost no commensurate records of property ownership on Gurugram’s urban frontier. Rather, the task of the Patwari’s office is to broker alignment between the various distinct registers of land and property ownership, and provisionally settle claims in title deeds (Cowan 2022). Indeed, the ambiguity over property boundaries and uses, hidden by the authoritative glare of the modernist grid, fundamentally shape land aggregation and property development on the agrarian–urban frontier. This state of unmapping requires that those seeking to alienate or aggregate property engage in creative bureaucratic work.

The Patwari office is as such occupied by numerous private actors, brokers, and dealers digging through state record

books, searching for information on land shares, and accumulating evidence of a land parcel's owners, tenants, its tenurial status and historical encumbrances. "I am an expert in shares," Neeraj boasted as we sat waiting for the bureaucrat. He proceeded to discuss how the unmapped shares are no obstacle to projects of land acquisition or aggregation, drawing out a series of rectangles on a torn sector plan document to demonstrate, he explained, that in order to capture land shares and partition them from their existing joint-ownership, liaisons like him can buy up any share in the rectangle, and from there can negotiate with co-landowners over the exact position and size, or else buy them out at a later date. The penciled piece of paper now resembled a zig-zagged lattice, with a giant circle gesturing Neeraj's entire colonization of the land. The 'negotiation' he referred to is of course a far more complex process, in which caste-power and association become particularly important, as liaisons like Neeraj use local and political connections to put pressure on stubborn tenants and landlords to sell on or give in favorable locations. In this manner, the rectangle's opacity, when ensconced in local agrarian hierarchies, works for projects of land revalorization. On the one hand, the rectangle provides real estate firms with a geometric framework to buy up shares, in an already consolidated rectangle of property; on the other hand, it provides the requisite space for maneuver and negotiation that is required to part people from their land. The rectangle thus provides a generative canvas for property-making. Through working closely with the revenue officials, Neeraj explains as he sketches out land plots shifting across a grid on the back of an envelope, one is able to secure a desirable plot. Neeraj's narrated tour of the share-system demonstrated the imaginative work that the grid affords, allowing real estate actors space to conjure up parcelized plots within undivided rectangles. If we often think of state ambiguity and 'unmapping' as a resource that enables the postcolonial state to vest land in vote bank communities (Roy 2003), in places like Gurugram incommensurate state records and unmapped land enables private firms the space to maneuver and flex their intimate connections to local agrarian institutions to envision, aggregate, and capture land.

Flexing Ambiguity

Property-making strategies also rely upon ambiguous tenure regimes. Over the past two decades, thousands of acres of village common and forest land in Gurugram have been controversially bought, plotted, and developed by the local state, landowners, and private developers. These include a series of luxury residential complexes and a USD \$100 million ‘special economic zone’ project developed by New York investment firm, JP Morgan, and the Indian developer, ASF group. The capture and transformation of Gurugram’s southern periphery, noted for its mountain range, forests, and water bodies, has been aided by the government’s expansion of the Gurugram master plan, and the construction of two eight-lane highways connecting Gurugram with neighboring Sohna, itself recently rebranded ‘South Gurugram.’

Today the local revenue office responsible for the mutation and partition of rural land in the area is bustling with brokers, liaisons, and landowners seeking to get their claims to the land paper, while the land itself is marked by the ubiquitous materials of expectant ‘development’ — pitched fences, proxy farmhouses, and roadside brokerage offices. The competition to plot the commons, is one contested by different rentier alliances, with distinct interpretations of the commons and visions for its future. For the local state, the commons is public land to be utilized for political supporters and to facilitate industrial accumulation, while for landowners and developers the commons is private property. These struggles to commodify the commons are activated by the ambiguity of the status of the land itself.

Ram Singh sat outside a bungalow in the foothills of the Aravalli Mountain range, which runs south from New Delhi. The bungalow was sparse, not lived in, and occupied by some plastic chairs. Ram Singh’s family home was on the other side of the village. He came from a family that had their rights to village land enshrined under various colonial land settlement laws at the turn of the twentieth century. While his grandfather had worked a small strip of land as an owner-cultivator, he and his brothers owned various village properties and ran a small construction business that drew its business from Gurgaon’s insatiable urbanization. Ram Singh’s family, in other words, form part of this fledgling agrarian–urban class alliance that is doing much of the work to assemble and convert property in and around the city.

Ram Singh’s family had constructed the bungalow in the 1980s on land that, he assured me, was fully owned by his family. Pulling

out a copy of the land record (*jamabandi*), he fingered the column displaying his grandfather's name and the size of the family's share in the joint-owned plot. Stapled to the back was a hand-drawn sketch of the land parcel, attested by a land revenue official. After constructing the bungalow, his family petitioned for a demarcation and registration of his share in the land to be undertaken by the local Patwari office, which duly made the requisite amendments to the land record to show his possession of the land. "We had this house built on our land," he explained as we looked over a landscape of sparse forest, tall residential towers, and large villas, "but others here sold land [to developers] years ago."

Ram Singh's land forms part of over 460 acres of common land in Gwal Pahari village, valued at over 3,000 crore rupees (500 million USD). This privately owned common land was later vested with the village councils (*panchayats*) for the common-purpose of the village. Since the municipalization of Gurugram in 2012 the jurisdiction and possessions of the old village councils have formally passed to the Gurugram Municipal Council, transferring crores of land value to the government. And yet, for decades prior to this administrative transfer, these lands had been partitioned, sold, and developed by a host of private actors from real estate developers and industrialists to former judges and politicians (Khatry 2018). This complex history of land transfer has even made its way into the local master plan. For the state, the common lands are public property, and as such have been zoned for 'public purpose' special economic zones. How this stretch of commons became private property, falling into the hands of real estate developers, relates to a longer history of land privatization that has produced ambiguous common property regimes.

The recent history of the commons in Gurugram, and Haryana, is one of iterative privatization and enclosure—sites of successive government efforts to maximize agricultural productivity, and slowly eaten up by landowners under threat from growing tenancy rights in the postindependence period. As Gururani (2018: 114) notes, the 'commons' in North India is a rather "capacious category" capturing a broad divergence of land tenures and social meanings. The commons has frequently been a site of tussle and compromise between conflicting principles of land: of productivity and livelihood, of commune and privatization, and of profit and social reproduction. Common lands in North India are, in principle, a series of different land tenures and uses managed in common by the village, a marker of ongoing socioeconomic transition. The commons do not represent some prehistory to capitalism in India but rather a territorial compro-

mise marked by competing visions for rural futures: between agriculturalists and pastoralists, settlers and nomads, production and social reproduction. There is no singular nor static ‘commons’ that is designated a transhistorical function of community; the commons has always referred to a variety of property regimes, each with differing customs of ownership and use, and has always been the subject of political struggle (Chakravarty-Kaul 1992). While there is not space here to dive deeply into the fraught histories of land settlement that produced a variegated commons, it is relevant to briefly outline the piecemeal privatization of the commons in Gurugram under British colonial rule.

British land settlements in the mid-nineteenth century sought to identify and cultivate a class of agrarian property-owning cultivators. As part of this process, the ‘commons’ were mapped, enclosed and formally assigned as the joint-property of village landowners (*malikan deh*). The village landowners held the right to use, manage, possess, and partition these common lands, while non-proprietors held grazing and limited usufruct rights (Charavarty-Kaul 1992). The colonial intervention not only formalized commons arrangements into land registration systems of obligations and responsibilities (Bhattacharya 2019), but in doing so sought to erode non-agrarian, communal land uses, and to convert common lands into an fungible form of property at the expense of non-landowning pastoralists and tenants (Chakravarty-Kaul 1992). While still titled ‘common’ lands at the turn of the twentieth century, village landowners now held a definitive share in the commons and could sell, partition, and cultivate that share. The commons, always a form of property, were iteratively transformed into an exclusive—if jointly held—form of private property. The land remained ‘the commons,’ but not as we might know it.

The village landowners’ proprietary rights over the commons were substantially extended by processes of land consolidation between the 1950s and 1970s. Land consolidation schemes, ostensibly instruments of Green Revolution modernization, gridded land and extended villages’ cultivatable areas substantially by reclassifying former forest, grazing, and waste land (previously ‘commons’) as cultivatable. While most schemes did reserve non-alienable common lands to enable the extension of residential areas, many others replaced the traditional commons with new land-uses altogether. These included lands reserved for revenue-generating purposes for village panchayats, and additional privately owned lands that had been leased to the panchayat by landowners for common purposes

(known as *jumla mushtarka malkan*, hereafter 'jumla' land). This jumla land was the undivided property of village landowners, many of whom utilized the land for cultivation, but was formally vested in the village panchayat councils. In short, the process of consolidation not only significantly extended the privatization of the commons, but in doing so it also produced multiple, overlapping land tenures that all came under the term '*shamlat deh,*' the commons. The commons is at once private property and communal property, for private and public use, vested with the state and owned by landowners.

Common Struggles

These overlapping tenures and purposes, and the ambiguity they produce in the present conjuncture, animate property-making claims. According to a report by a former director general of consolidations in Haryana, Ashok Khemka, the government have routinely engaged in processes of consolidation within forest, hill, and common land areas in southern Gurugram as a way of transferring hundreds of crores worth of land to private actors (Khemka 2013: 12–13). These include the denotification of forest areas and the privatization of different forms of village commons. Since Gurugram's property boom in the 1990s, real estate developers on Gurugram's southern periphery have jumped on common land's tenurial ambiguity, and have utilized a variety of legal and material instruments to substantiate their territorial claims.

Ram Singh's bungalow sat, he claimed, on his family's share of the jumla land. Landowners like Ram Singh have routinely utilized Power of Attorney—a legal instrument that bypasses formal property registration—in order to trade titles in common lands. They have also ordered land boundary demarcations, constructed roads and infrastructure, assembled paperwork through the Patwari office, and incrementally developed 'facts on the ground' to substantiate their claim on the land. As Caldeira (2017) notes, this kind of irregular autoconstruction forms the predominant mode of urbanization in the majority world, a practice of city-making that Caldeira notes stands 'transversally' to official state and planning domains. And yet, much like Neeraj's office-work discussed previously, the plotting and construction of common lands is engaged in by a wide range of actors, including corporate real estate firms and the state itself. It is, in other words, not a peripheral or transversal practice but rather the central driving force of real estate expansion on the frontier.

The issue on the land came to a head in 2009 when, following the inauguration of the Municipal Council of Gurugram (MCG), the village common lands were formally transferred from the village councils to the municipality. The MCG claim the high-value land is government land for public purpose, and have used ‘public purpose’ instruments to plot and masterplan a special economic zone on the land. The MCG persuaded land revenue officials to mutate the ownership of the land in the state registry in their favor. For landowners, developers, and the owners of luxury farmhouses that sit on the land, the municipalization of the commons is an act of aggression, a denial of their constitutional rights to private property.

Beyond material acts of constructing boundary walls and small bungalows, and assembling the paperwork, actors like Ram Singh in coalition with corporate real estate actors have leveraged their significant political and financial clout to appeal the transfer in court on numerous occasions (Khatri 2018). The latest ruling, issued in September 2018, ordered that the land, being jumla land, was the exclusive property of village landowners, but could only be used for common purposes, thus putting both the state and private actors in a tricky position. The land can neither be sold to developers nor plotted privately, nor can it be transferred to the municipality free of charge; so, if the MCG want the land, they will have to pay out crores to acquire it.

These tussles to settle the commons are widespread across India’s urban frontier, with tens of cases involving thousands of acres of land across Gurugram’s southern villages alone.⁷ On one hand, this latest ruling has effectively re-commoned the land, removing legal titles from scores of developers and private actors; on the other, it has reaffirmed the land as the exclusive property of village landowners. The entirety is complicated by decades of land transactions, the plotting and development of operational residential complexes, and high-profile owners on the ground who have attempted to substantiate their claims on paper and on the ground.

Capturing Urban Futures

Ram Singh and I first met as he was attempting to firm up his claim on the parcel by applying for a land-boundary demarcation at the local Patwari office. While officially these demarcations had been stayed by the government, it was still possible, if likely expensive, to persuade revenue officials and private surveyors to conduct a

survey. Just as described by Neeraj previously, these land-boundary demarcations require a degree of creativity. Property within the commons is not mapped, and the few survey reference stones that anchor the ground to state maps have been destroyed by landowners and developers in their own property-making engagements. In lieu of maps, land surveyors have to get creative, and rely upon existing developments and landmarks (no matter their formality) to conduct land surveys (Cowan 2021). Here the informal plotting of farmhouses and bungalows folds into demarcation maps and formal documentation. Obtaining a survey report importantly contributes to a host of documentation that landowners are able to wield to alienate their undivided land-shares and claim property.

The presentist survey image and historical documentation of possession work in tandem then with the physical occupation of a piece of land. In this regard, working property is both a spatial and a temporal practice, so it requires hauling together different registers of property, each with their own quite distinct temporal frames. While paperwork can substantiate (or at least gesture toward) legal ownership, physical possession via the pitching of boundary walls, construction of a plot, or connection to trunk infrastructure evokes an immediate aesthetic of formality that is important to claiming property (Ghertner 2015). Echoing Neeraj's comments, many of those I met who were busy readying land for property claims explained that claiming physical possession (*kabza*) of a share in the land—by erecting boundary walls, conducting GPS demarcations—was a vital component of the process. Indeed, much to my surprise, many of those I spent time with placed far less importance on the specifics of documentation than they did on the material presence of real estate development on the land. As one landowner explained, “if [we] make a proper house and there is a proper road, then the paperwork will follow . . . with companies [developers] and sectors [residential complexes] coming here, this development is good for everyone, [so] the government won't destroy this.”

The confidence to lay physical claim to land, often in lieu of formal ownership rights, has to do with yet another temporality of property-making. Behind many private actors' claims to property on the former commons is an assured confidence in the common-sense hegemony of real estate uses for land (proper roads, industrial parks, real estate investment, etc.) and the propertied claims of agrarian elites, no matter their particular legality. This confidence is perhaps unsurprising after all. City planners have long projected a future-oriented vision of rural land in a singular movement toward

urbanization. More than simply a material endeavor, landowners like Ram Singh understand that their property claims are substantiated by *who* they are and *what* they are claiming. Were it scheduled caste-communities tentatively claiming residence (Cowan 2019) or pastoralists claiming forest and grazing lands, these vernacular property claims would no doubt be given short shrift by the state. As a Patwari explained, “this land is for the benefit of the *bhumidars* [landowners] . . . there have been plots like this all over Gurugram for many years now. We cannot tear down the whole city, in time these will be regularized.” Indeed, over the past five years alone, the municipality have sought the regularization of land encroachments in fifty settlements across the city.

There is, as these accounts show, one direction that rural land moves in—one in which it is owned as exclusive property (by the state, developers, or agrarian landowners) and used for industrial and real estate accumulation. A court judgment on the Gwal Pahari case, which disposed in favor of the private parties in 2018, affirmed this logic, claiming that “since the land has changed its agrarian character, after coming within the municipal limits, it is essential that all the stakeholders in the society . . . realize that a 464.6-acre grazing ground is not required in the heart of the [National Capital Region], where the suit land is located” (Siwach 2018).

The mere presence of private property, municipal administration, and propertied citizens, no matter how illegal or informal its past, holds together an ideological project of real-estate-led urban development within which non-normative forms of property—here common grazing lands—appear archaic and almost inevitably out of place. Practices of occupying ambiguous territories and navigating bureaucratic spaces to secure property, in this sense are animated by a broader hegemonic conjuncture within which future development is tightly bound to real estate and private property.

The Frontlines of Property

For mainstream planners, academics, and activists, the vernacular private property-making strategies that I have briefly explored here can be characterized as ‘informal’; they take place outside of capitalist land markets, and signify the over-zealous state regulations, corruption or else poverty that plague the non-Western world (de Soto 2000). And yet these practices are mainstream pathways to the expansion and reproduction of conditions of real estate-led accumulation on

the urban frontier. That is to say, incremental occupation, territorial ambiguity, and negotiated bureaucratic settlements occupy a central place within commodification processes. These are, as I have argued, structured by an attendant class alliance between agrarian landowners and the state that renders sensible particular outcomes of land use and tenure. By attending to these vernacular modes of enclosure, we are able to distance ourselves from unhelpful binaries—formal vs informal, state rationalization vs popular resistance, planned vs unplanned—that frame these kinds of territorial practice as “weapons of the weak” (see Benjamin 2019). The master plan, cadaster, land tenure systems may be inventions of the (colonial) modern state, but in practice they are embedded within a fraught socio-material and institutional politics that ‘insidious’ capital lands itself in and looks to exploit. Central to strategies of property-making on Gurugram’s peripheries is the fluid character of land itself. On the field and in the office, land boundaries are imaginatively laid, plots swapped, and tenures reassigned, in ways that creatively package together private property. As Hull (2012) suggests, bureaucratic materials are contested artefacts, deployed within political terrains by competing actors mobilizing competing visions of property; from Ram Singh’s bungalow to a multinational SEZ complex. These strategies are not simply spontaneously assembled, but are strengthened and affirmed by histories of landed-class compositions, complex tenurial regimes, and a current politico-economic conjuncture that ideologically pins rural futures to real estate development.

In this way, these property-making practices have much in common with Solomon Benjamin’s “occupancy urbanism.” In opposition to parochial representations of urban enclosures, Benjamin examines the intensive and incremental reclamation of private property across the world’s urban centers by everyday people. Utilizing opaque land tenures, porous spatial strategies, and the patronage of local political institutions, occupancy urbanism, he argues, disrupts the view of the map and ‘disfigures’ singular forms of property. And yet, while Benjamin accepts that these “complex occupancies” are struggles central to the commodity process, occupancy urbanism tends to describe the actions of the urban poor. In Gurugram and indeed in much of India’s urban periphery, we have an occupancy urbanism for valorization, rather than as acts of commoning or redistribution. Here it is capital and private interests that are mobilizing opaqueness and encroaching on land in order to ready it for commodification. These actors occupy *for* property, not against it. This process, nonetheless, is not smooth. In common with Benjamin,

processes of vernacular enclosure disrupt modernist linearities that presuppose land, of diverse kinds, as private property. Further, it relies on complex negotiations between village landowners, tenants, and state officials, and the deployment of ambiguous agrarian land tenures and pliable bureaucratic materials. The implication of territorial subversion and compromise in enclosure projects affords power to a variety of actors to make claims and counterclaims on land in ways that leave the fate of property claims contingent upon a vernacular reorganization of territory to enable capital's enclosure of land.

The real estate moment on India's urban peripheries has forced a series of, what Don Kalb (2014) has called, "shifting alliances between blurry groups, based on complex moral visions and desires" that are becoming "more frequent, more intense, more massive, [and] more confrontational" in modern capitalist urbanization. These hegemonic class maneuvers structure the repurposing of agrarian property institutions—the land revenue bureaucracy as well as the commons—for capitalist purposes. The penetration of 'insidious capital' in the form of corporate real estate into the socio-material machinations of property-making as discussed here is an instance of these uneasy and fluid class alliances.

These spaces are, in other words the frontlines, the contingent (though certainly structured) points of encounter, where global forces of enclosure, standardization, and dispossession meet the socio-material specificities of land to produce unstable and deeply contested geographies of value. Importantly, attention to the socio-material pliability of land—shifting plots, captured commons, reclassified tenures—provides a lens through which to understand the quiet politics of enclosure that persists on the urban frontier.

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Notes

1. See Singur controversy.
2. Especially in North Indian states in which landowners hold significant demographic and political influence.
3. Known as Gurgaon prior to 2017.
4. In 2008 the chairman of DLF, the developer that spearheaded Gurugram’s rapid urbanization, proclaimed the city to be ‘a showpiece of the new urban India.’
5. Exemption from Ceiling Regulations.
6. See Sud 2014.
7. In 2019, the government of Haryana passed a bill that further opened up forest land for real estate capture.

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CONSTRUCTION, LABOR, AND LUXURY IN KATHMANDU'S POST-CONFLICT TOURISM ECONOMY

Dan Hirslund



Barring the debilitating effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic on the travel industry worldwide, tourism has been on a steady growth path over the past thirty years, whether measured in travelers or economic output, trailing the successes of the globalization of capital.¹ At the same time, a slow but significant shift is underway in travel markets from the dominance of Europe and North America towards Asian countries,² reflecting the region's deliberate, if variegated, liberalization of markets, and a simultaneous sharp growth in middle classes that have historically been the drivers of mass tourism. Tourism, as I analyze it here, is on the one hand a result of global shifts in capitalist power configurations, particularly along an East-West axis, while on the other hand it is itself a driver of disruptions and expansions in specific regions. Tourism has therefore become a specific frontline in the expansion of capital, a targeted search to realize value, and the work it does on the ground is 'insidious'; it inserts itself in the messy life of concrete sociopolitical formations with the aim of spotting 'good opportunities,' and soon finds itself entangled in existing struggles over value that it must both navigate and confront. In the most immediate sense, then, this reorientation of global tourism—towards Asia and middle-class sentiments—signals a change in the markets and products of the industry that results in the creation of new zones of intervention, new frontlines of value, that are spatial as well as social.

In this chapter, I focus on the pressures and counterpressures around labor issues that result from this new tourism frontline in the Himalayas. Specifically, I trace the work that luxury tourism, and in particular the construction of high-end hotels, does in propagating a new regime of value in Nepal's capital Kathmandu, where I have been doing ethnographic fieldwork on labor and construction since 2015, and on tourism and hospitality since 2018.³ Nepal's tourist industry has been undergoing rapid changes since two devastating earthquakes in April and May 2015 created havoc in the real-estate market. This produced enabling conditions for a new class of investors to enter the sector, while transitions in the global geography of tourism also prompted both a rise in the number of arrivals from the Western to the Eastern hemisphere, and a shift in their nationalities.⁴ Nevertheless, Nepal's tourism industry remains miniscule in comparison with that of other smaller South Asian nations, such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, whose economies are closely bound to the 'global tourism system' (Cornelissen 2005; Crick 1994). But similar to these—and unlike Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bhutan (Richter 1989; Schroeder 2017)—Nepal has, since its official 'opening' to foreign influences in 1950, been adopting a liberal tourist policy and allowed international demand to drive the national development of tourism spaces. In contrast, however, to the 'sun, sand, and sex' tourism that has characterized tropical resort development in coastal pockets around the globe, including in South and Southeast Asia,⁵ Himalayan tourism has historically been less spectacular and less resource-intensive, and therefore not as lucrative for national and foreign investors. This is now changing.

Viewed from the perspective of a value regime, tourism in Nepal has been uneven in its growth, geographically scattered, sectorally divided between very different types of tourism, informally organized, and—importantly—with only limited involvement from the nation's ruling classes, except for a few property-driven downtown venues. As also noted for India by Linda Richter, tourism in South Asia is profoundly interregional, as long histories of pilgrimage to Buddhist and Hindu sites connect Nepal with India and Sri Lanka (respectively accounting for 21.2 and 4.6 percent of international arrivals in 2019).⁶ This has allowed for a considerable domestic tourism industry—though more so for India than Nepal, where travel is more expensive due to the mountainous terrain—and, crucially, the development of a dispersed and local hospitality and travel sector with few dominant economic or political actors. Unlike tourism development in most countries where research has been con-

ducted, the Nepalese state has not been very active in promoting or supporting the industry; there have not been strong business interests in dominating the market, or much interest from global corporations in investing in the industry.

Nepal's integration into the global tourism industry therefore poses something of a conundrum. On the one hand, tourist arrivals are rising—and quite significantly too, even if the total number only surpassed 1 million in 2018—with Chinese visitors now accounting for 14 percent (up from 6.3 percent a decade earlier), and visitors from Myanmar, Thailand, South Korea, and Malaysia beginning to rival some of the former dominant Western powers such as the UK, US, and Germany. On the other hand, very limited development of the tourism industry has taken place to reflect the growth and changing composition of arrivals. The Nepal Tourism Board—the state's major tourism institution—still promotes the country as a backpacker destination, and references its 'natural beauty,' including 'Nepali smiles' and cultural hospitality, as its major assets. These themes, which hinge on a particular nationalist narrative (Bhandari 2019), have been recycled *ad nauseam* since the development of the first national tourism policy in the early 1970s, and hide more fundamental shifts in the nation's tourism economy.

It is in this space of indeterminacy for the tourist value regime that I locate my problematic. With a geopolitical shift toward the East, which has helped stabilize Nepal's post-conflict and post-disaster government, a new class of entrepreneurial businesses has begun to invest fiercely in a luxury tourism market that hardly exists: the narrow segment of four- and five-star hotel accommodation. In comparative terms, this is an interesting development. Luxury hotel construction has historically taken place where there is already a strong state presence that will guarantee supporting infrastructure and the security of investments, such as around resorts (Adler and Adler 2004), heritage sites (Hazbun 2008), and urban regeneration (Amore 2019). This is unsurprising given that building high-profile hotels is both an expensive and a long-term commitment. A more common scenario in the mixed-liberal regimes of Asia compared to the Euro-American market is one where the state is actively involved in financing (or even owning and running) hotels, such as happened under Marco's corrupt and dictatorial regime in the Philippines, or, in a much more sustainable (but also less 'luxurious') manner, in postcolonial and pre-liberalized India (Richter 1989). Yet Nepal today fits neither of these trajectories, with a political elite much too weak to dominate, let alone finance, expensive tourist accommodation, and



Figure 5.1. Construction site for a luxury hotel in Kathmandu.
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a recently federalized state that is frantically trying to catch up to its comprehensive development goals across the multiple schisms of national space to prevent further regional conflicts from destabilizing the polity.

Luxury Tourism

The very recent emergence of this high-profile economic sector in Nepal therefore arrives, as it were, on its own, in relative isolation from state policy,⁷ and, possibly more surprisingly, despite a convincing market for these new facilities. With average tourist spending in Nepal around US\$40 per day, the scope for selling above-US\$100 room-nights seems limited. Yet, it is precisely the hope of capturing a share of this small but lucrative market that attracts new investors and pits them against each other through an economy of anticipation. Between 2004 and 2012, the total number of star-hotels in the country had fallen (from 110 to 107) and by 2015 there were still only 116. Between 2015 and 2019, however, 22 new hotels were built, mostly in the upper segment of the spectrum, and another handful are under construction in Kathmandu alone. The 2015 earthquakes flattened or destroyed many tall buildings in the valley, and created an understandable concern regarding high-risers that

had just begun to become popular by aspiring middle classes prior to the disaster. The sudden interest from investors in constructing outsized high-risers in a city where the tradition had been to build three-floor residences adds to the mythologization of these new monuments to modernity, and it has generalized an appetite for a growing tourist economy. Newspapers now offer routine updates on how 'tourism' is doing, and publish the latest figures for international arrivals. Notwithstanding what critical scholars might think of capital-intensive urban enclave-development, the new hotel projects are immensely popular in Kathmandu, as they are seen to be boosting the local economy as well as bringing a modernizing appeal to the city.

It is clear here that real-estate-driven luxury tourism in Nepal is a value regime in the dialectical sense outlined by Don Kalb in the Introduction as a multiscalar but historically specific field of new agents and old and new values. The driver of Kathmandu's posh urbanity, with which the tourism frontline seeks to ally, is the rise of a new cosmopolitan middle class, itself a product of the polity's extreme centralization, which has guaranteed comfortable high-caste affluence in this shielded Himalayan valley, despite extreme poverty in the rest of the country. Originally composed of three small valley kingdoms, each with compact urban 'Durbar' centers surrounded by lush agricultural fields, Kathmandu has over the past decades witnessed a sprawling urbanization that has turned many indigenous Newari landowners into wealthy landlords. New elites have prospered in the nexuses between growing development aid and trade liberalization, while the conspicuous growth of the valley's population has increased social stratification as migrants escaping conflict violence and rural poverty have flocked into urban fringes. Alarming levels of pollution are compounding social divisions, as affluent citizens escape filth, traffic congestion, and poverty by moving to higher ground and away from the dense, and increasingly dysfunctional, downtown areas. The Bagmati River, Kathmandu's major water source, is contaminated by stinking sewage and trails this new spatial division as it winds its way through the city's low-lying areas, engulfing its unfortunate inhabitants with its repulsive odors. The new high-rise luxury construction thrives on this spatial, even olfactory, division, as it employs airtight, soundproof, and elevated experiences of historic neighborhoods far above the travails of the everyday. One vector of tourism's value regime consists of this very precise encapsulation of historic 'value' — experiencing the Durbar squares of past kingdoms — within a contemporary capitalist

technology: the protective shield of luxury accommodation. Luxury itself is a dialectical outcome of this contrast, which capital momentarily brings together.

Luxury tourism, however, does not only operate on the scale of the tourist experience. It is also deeply entwined in the politics of infrastructure development. While tourism has historically been on the peripheries of landscapes of accumulation in Nepal, the growth of a nascent industry around luxury accommodation articulates with, and benefits from, the state's geopolitical strategies.

Nepal's post-conflict and post-disaster governments have looked to regional reconfigurations of travel and wealth to transcend its historical dependency on India's travel market, most directly through investing in the building of the new Gautam Buddha international airport, which can serve as a regional hub. As Daniel Mains (2019) has shown for Ethiopia, fragile regimes faced with the prospects of failed modernization double down on infrastructure construction both as a signal of modernity and as a concrete strategy to increase regional integration. These links between what Mains considers a paradigmatic tension of 'developmental states' and their production of spaces 'under construction' are relevant for considering Nepal's development compact as well, which has become caught in an accelerated infrastructural expansionist fantasy that articulates new donor concerns with expanding the market state across the rugged Himalayan terrain, and the hype of the Smart Cities program that has accompanied India's BJP leader Narendra Modi's rise to power (Kaur 2020). Kathmandu is deeply integrated into these unfolding contours of contemporary global urbanization as a 'backward' mountain valley city seeking to emulate the successes of other global metropolises. Today's boom in hotel construction, however, is privately funded by leading national industrialists, and with very little, if any, direct foreign investment, thus raising important questions about how such infrastructural projects articulate national political priorities or change regional economic integration. It is to probe the precise linkages between states and global actors in promoting tourism development that I attend to the politics of construction. Because of its dependence on expensive materiality that needs to be sourced from a large network of local and international providers, and its reliance on large quantities of labor with very different levels of expertise and deeply divergent mobilities, construction offers a privileged prism for investigating the value struggles of development regimes.

To trace this nexus between luxury tourism and construction, I offer an analysis of the regimes of labor through which Nepal's

frontlines of tourism is being waged. The anthropology of labor has recently enjoyed a resurgence (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014), showing the relevance of detailed case studies to review important shifts in capitalist globalization. Here I approach the problematic of luxury accommodation from multiple vantage points to bring out the continuities and discontinuities of labor's composition within the overall accumulation of the hospitality industry. The regime of labor perspective in this chapter can thus be seen as a concretization of the wider regime of value in which tourism is inserted, and through which it realizes itself as a 'politics of operations' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). This requires transcending analytical niches that are usually kept separate, in particular the distinction between construction labor, which is generally understood under the rubric of 'production,' and hotel labor, which is seen to fall under 'services.' But these two groups of laborers—which are divided by social status and the nature of their labor—are in fact employed by the one and same capitalist on the same infrastructural project, and they fill complementary roles at opposite ends of the life of new hotels: the first group as builders and the second as service staff. While labor processes differ markedly from construction to the running of tourist facilities, these two are intimately connected from a value perspective because they form part of the same capital and merely express different moments in the production process. To offer a balanced evaluation of how Nepal's tourism economy is being transformed by investments in luxury properties, it seems advantageous to bring these two different moments of accumulation into the same analytical frame. I start with an analysis of how luxury construction requires a shift in expertise, also an expression of labor, before moving on to show what kinds of labor politics these new configurations unleash.

Engineering Luxury

In the middle of one of Kathmandu's congested neighborhoods lies Chandaki,⁸ one of the city's premier historical hotels, which since its opening in the 1970s has provided a tranquil respite in 'traditional' surroundings for upper-class Nepalese visitors who can afford to spend the US\$250 price tag per night. The hotel promotes a laid-back and indeed deliberately 'anti-modern' atmosphere based on artful decoration and slow but deeply personalized service. But when I met the owner over a cup of tea in July 2019 in the hotel's stylish courtyard, he explained to me that they must also rethink what experience

they offer in comparison with newer deluxe hotels. Although the current premises are set in sumptuous surroundings, Ghandaki cannot, for instance, offer comparable amenities for vehicles, thus forcing customers to commute by taxi or accept parking their cars in crowded entrance areas, if at all. This has become an issue in a city where upmarket hotels derive a significant portion of their revenues from restaurant services to locals, and where there are few alternative parking options.⁹ Nepal's post-conflict period has seen a conspicuous rise in the private ownership of expensive vehicles as a consequence of aspiring middle-classes relocating to suburban neighborhoods, and this has had a visible effect on links between cars and class.¹⁰ Insufficient parking in city centers has forced hotels catering to this important class segment to give more consideration to proper parking facilities, and to develop these in tandem with other upgrades to their services when planning the architecture of hotel compounds.

The changing conditions of Kathmandu's hotel industry cannot be adequately understood without considering shifts in the market for land in recent times. Nepal's urbanization drive happened quite late compared to other South Asian metropolises; first because the country was never directly integrated into the British colonial infrastructure, and secondly because its national modernization only took off in the 1960s and was for a long time centered on rural rather than urban reform. Kathmandu started growing markedly in the 1990s with economic and political liberalization, as expanding industries brought new migrant populations to the city, and flows of international aid created jobs for educated middle classes. While the political conflict with the Maoists (1996–2006) dampened economic expansion and led to setbacks for GDP growth and tourism alike in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the mostly rural violence nonetheless created a push to urban areas. This meant there was a steady inflow of settlers, particularly from neighboring mountain communities, and a pressure to convert agricultural land into peri-urban zones. Since the 2007 peace agreement that brought an end to the Maoist war, real estate prices have been growing rapidly and have led to further suburbanization and escalating downtown prices, which now match some of the most expensive areas in Mumbai and Delhi. Even during recent crises—the 2015 earthquakes and the 2020 global pandemic—core areas of the city have seen price hikes of between 5 and 10 percent in just six months. The reason for this largely uninterrupted growth, one real estate developer explained to me, is that less and less of the valleys' limited land mass is coming onto the market.¹¹ It has therefore become increasingly difficult to acquire land for rede-

velopment purposes, and this scarcity of land in turn puts enormous pressure on hotel investors—for whom location is key—to design efficient revenue-generating buildings.

As part of the Ghandaki hotel's drive to remain competitive with changes to the tourism sector, they signed a contract with the renowned construction company Sagarmatha Inc in 2018 to build an annex to their existing heritage-style compound. One of the significant changes to have emerged in the field of construction in recent years is a willingness to engage with the challenge of digging deeper into the ground and constructing full basements. While Ghandaki's new building design includes novel elements such as an interior courtyard and a presidential suite with its own indoor pool, the most expensive and complicated element is in fact the double-basement structure, which extends 15 meters into the ground and is projected to take almost a year to build. I have been following the gradual completion of this critical foundation, first on the site and later back in Denmark via regular updates. Unlike the myriad single-residence construction projects that dominate the building boom in Kathmandu, and which I have been observing for several years, the building of Ghandaki's annex requires a different level of expertise than the predominant and much smaller construction projects in the valley. One important reason for this is that the geological conditions of the Himalayan region offer a significant challenge to construction technologies due to the nature of alluvial deposits based on millennia of sediments. Digging underground in what is in effect the bottom of a dried-up lake is consequently fraught with danger, because the 'sand'—as engineers call it—is prone to sliding and to thus pulling down adjacent buildings. Stories of collapsing outer walls in connection with digging are common, and have proliferated in the post-earthquake reconstruction rush.

The building of Ghandaki's second hotel structure was dominated from the outset by engineering experts. Upon receiving the contract, Sagarmatha Inc disputed the original design and managed to convince the owner that a more solid foundation was needed, even if this added time and money to the project. Sagarmatha's project team consisted almost entirely of structural engineers and they set up office on the top floor of an adjacent building, where its walls soon became plastered with elaborate Gantt Charts, technical drawings, and test results from ongoing measurements of concrete mixes and soil conditions. Before any excavation could be started, eight benchmarks around the perimeter were constructed (long iron rods dug into the ground, and leveled), which would serve as reference points



Figure 5.2. Construction of a luxury hotel in Kathmandu. © Dan Hirslund

for routine measurements of the stability of the ground and the outer walls. All technical drawings were done on industry-standard software packages (AutoCAD), and junior engineers were measuring the thickness of slabs and the distance between rebars, and testing the concrete with each new casting to feed these data into elaborate reports on each step of construction. There was nothing mysterious about this level of detailed expertise—it followed textbook formulas for engineering knowledge, and is testimony to the universalization of engineering epistemology in the global construction industry. But in the context of Nepal’s construction sector, this is an exemplary building process that has only very recently begun to characterize urban construction, and where the luxury hotel sector is leading the way.

The construction industry in Nepal dates from the 1970s when ambitious national targets for road, bridge, and airport construction gave rise to a specialized sector for what was primarily enterprises for assembling labor and materials with very limited investment in machinery. The sector grew over the next decades, buoyed up by infrastructural development aid and a controversial liberalized system for bidding on government contracts, which saw small national contractors partnering up with international companies for large prestigious projects that required external expertise, capital,

and machinery but that kept local resources fragmented and underdeveloped. Relative to other economic sectors, however, the construction industry in Nepal is relatively powerful with a strong lobbying organization (FCAN—Federation of Contractors' Associations of Nepal). The post-conflict context with its renewed focus on infrastructural development, and the post-earthquake reconstruction boom, which consolidated reinforced concrete (RC) technology as the 'earthquake-safe' option and rushed out graduates with diplomas in structural engineering—until recently a very marginal subfield in the curriculum—has only added to the status of engineering expertise in the construction process. During the project at Ghandaki, Sagarmatha's team had several confrontations with the entrepreneur company whose expertise was in architecture. But on both occasions that I am acquainted with, the latter eventually had to withdraw their suggestions for changes to the contract as Sagarmatha's engineers, with their meticulous documentation and strong scientific grounding in safety standards, were able to win the argument once Ghandaki's owner had been called in for arbitration. The role of engineers in Kathmandu's construction industry has traditionally been limited to a control function, while the actual expertise has resided with experienced contractors. This arrangement has been possible because of the limited height of buildings in the valley (3–4 stories), the absence of basements, and the low cost of construction compared to the value of land. But this calculus is no longer operative for the new generation of hotels.

The manifestation of engineering expertise in construction is a frontline in the development of luxury tourism. The entire field for investing in and building deluxe hotels has shifted to smaller plots of land and a higher demand for 'international' standards with the recent spread of global hotel brands in the city and an increasingly cosmopolitan local middle class, which reflects sentiments from gentrified metropolises in South Asia and beyond. From the lush external surroundings and 'horizontal' layout of the city's older luxury establishments—Gokarna, Hyatt, Soaltee, Annapurna, Shangri-La, Malla, Yak & Yeti—the new luxuries are being defined by indoor amenities and the superiority of verticality, with its spectacular views and impeccable construction that offer sealed interiors, high-speed elevators, and floor-to-ceiling windows—and underground parking, of course. This is the world of the Marriott, Vivanta, and Aloft, and the under-construction Hyatt Place, Hilton, Holiday Inn, and Sheraton. Their construction costs are probably the most expensive single investments ever undertaken by private industry in the

country, and this in turn increases their dependence on standardized expertise, as creditors and partners demand an audited knowledge regime by way of security for participation. In effect, this is what building projects stabilize—an extended, coherent, and feasible plan of implementation that can guarantee promised returns on investments. Engineers, under current conditions of construction, can deliver this epistemological security, and they thereby push the world of building construction into new registers of authority and power that come to redefine relations between capital and labor. There is thus a very concrete way by which ‘the law of value,’ Marx’s formulation for the tendency of the profit motive (see Introduction) to trump alternative rationales, pushes a restructuring of value chains in the construction industry by putting the class of engineers and a particular domain of ‘scientific’ knowledge in charge of the production of infrastructure, thereby sidelining previously dominant values and their class representatives. This struggle, however, is primarily one between different elites, and thus takes the form of rivalry. But it creates push-down effects for the world of labor, where actual value must be constructed.

Deepening Traditional Hierarchies

Labor organization in Nepal is comparable to many other ‘semi-feudal’ contexts, where centuries of feudal state–society relations have stabilized exploitative but quite ‘functional’ working relations, despite the growth of a bureaucratic and formally rational-legal state apparatus. Unsurprisingly, this tendency is strongly prevalent in the agricultural sector (Sugden 2013), but it also penetrates the construction sector, despite its more modern and urban pretensions. Sarah Swider, reporting on the recent expansion of construction in China, has found that the bulk mobilization of workers takes place through numerous informal channels that control rural–urban migrations, contracts, wages, and even punishments in what she calls distinct “employment configurations” (Swider 2015). She argues, very forcefully, that these mechanisms for regulating industrial relationships show that despite the informal character of construction labor, it remains heavily regulated beyond the law, and that we need to pay attention to the larger labor regimes wherein informal labor occupies a central role. Studies from other countries and continents corroborate these findings (Bosch and Philips 2003; Mains 2019; Van der Loop 1996) and suggest that there might be unique links between

construction and informality that penetrate even highly regulated labor markets and strong governmental oversight. This can be important to keep in mind when evaluating construction's 'resistance' to formalization that I narrate in this section.

Nepal's construction sector has only been selectively formalized with the establishment of factories for cement and later steel production in the southern 'Terai' belt, where there is close access to raw materials from India. Unlike in China, on-site construction labor has historically never been institutionally organized. Instead, following on from the tributary labor that the Rana dynasty (1846–1951) forced upon its subject populations (Holmberg, March, and Tamang 1999), the post-Rana modernizing state that emerged with the crumbling of the British Empire continued the village-level organization of labor-gangs for most of its construction needs. These gangs of fifty to eighty workers organized under one *naike* (gang leader) developed with the road-building craze of the 1970s, and quickly became the favorite method for mobilizing sundry labor from dispersed mountain populations because it outsourced problems of recruitment to specialized contractors: as one influential study from that period reported, "contractors are basically men with wide networks of contacts capable of arranging the movement of large numbers of laborers with minimum material incentives" (Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron 1979: 133). Similar "employment configurations" have been reported from elsewhere (Sargent 2017; Troccoli 2019), including in Swider's study from China where she refers to this model as "mediated employment," and the defining characteristic seems to be construction's need for, and ability to suck up, miscellaneous groups of dispossessed workers from low-paying peripheries.

The dominance of mediated employment in construction is thus an indicator of the spatial dislocation between sites of production and sites of reproduction, which drives migrant populations into its orbits of accumulation, and which establishes a functioning 'regime of value.'¹² The first labor law to appear in Nepal in 1992 followed from the post-1990 state's liberalization efforts, and it categorically exempted businesses with fewer than ten employees from regulation, thus creating incentives for a further fragmentation of labor through expanded subcontracting systems—not just in construction but also in others sectors, such as garments, that provided low-skilled employment for migrating populations from underdeveloped rural regions (Graner 2009; O'Neill 2004). In Kathmandu, this disjuncture is furthered by expensive livelihood costs in an overpopulated valley. Consequently, construction workers generally live on

actual construction sites, rather than in urban slums (as these have not developed significantly in Kathmandu), and move around with the progression of the building. Contractors, in turn, navigate the needs of site managers on different building projects, and shift their workers around to accomplish specific tasks, as most labor gangs are specialized in particular niches of construction—slab construction, iron bending, formworks, and so on. The result is that labor and living conditions for most construction workers remain opaque to the construction companies, who rely on a large network of gang leaders to handle employment issues and organize work.

Like elsewhere, labor segmentation is thus also an elementary component of Nepal's construction sector. But the contradiction has been sharpened by the complex infrastructure projects connected with tourism expansion due to a more pronounced hierarchy on building sites. In the Ghandaki hotel expansion project, for instance, a full on-site management office had been erected where the chief engineer, site supervisor, and junior engineers could steer the construction process through the long working days, which generally lasted from 7 a.m. to sunset. While these white-helmet supervisors were directly employed by Sagarmatha and thus enjoyed complimentary lunches in the hotel's canteen, the yellow-helmet construction workers remained subject to terms imposed by mediating labor contractors, and were forced to hire their own cook to prepare meals in the interstitial spaces they had set up on the construction site. With sparse living quarters and nowhere to go and spend their free time, laborers ended up working long hours according to the rhythms of construction, thus making up for their meager hourly wages by relinquishing leisure time.

There is little indication that these hierarchies of labor have increased industrial conflicts, despite the otherwise militant history of unions in Nepal (Hoffmann 2013), which is perhaps a reflection of an individualized culture of competition that disperses tensions and thwarts collective action (Hirslund 2021). In fact, what surprised me most about this labor arrangement—of large pools of contracted migrant laborers living on-site with all employment issues settled by a middleman—was how little had ostensibly changed from the 'feudalized' gang-labor system of the 1970s, as described by Seddon et al. (1979). But what can seem from one perspective antiquated, and certainly deeply unjust, unfortunately makes a lot of sense from a company perspective. The ordinary profit of Nepal's construction companies—who neither invest in land nor sell luxury to tourists—stems from the incremental bonus on singular units of construction.

The going rate for this overhead was 15 percent on each expense unit during the summer of 2019—on each bag of cement, each truck-load of sand, each meter of iron rod, and each hour of construction labor. Out of this 15 percent profit, the company had to pay its own workers (the engineering team) and deduct wasted materials and other unforeseen expenses that were not covered by the narrow unit-based contract. Because construction labor—unlike supervision—was a direct contribution to the cost of the building and could be included in the unit price (Bill of Quantities), it was much wiser, from an economic viewpoint, to keep this labor on a subcontract basis (as with other inputs in construction), because this allowed for constant adjustments to supply based on how the project was progressing. Accordingly, when there was a slump in the need for labor—maybe because the necessary raw materials had not yet arrived, which was in fact one of the most frequent reasons for delays in the industry, though legal barriers and conflicts with clients were also common—then no wages would be ‘wasted’ on unproductive labor. In addition, the larger and more complex constructions that are typical of the new luxury hotels, as explained earlier, require more expensive structures wherein the value component of labor falls relative to the outlays for raw materials. The global standard for the labor composition of large-scale construction projects is somewhere between 5 and 10 percent. On the hotel construction site described above, labor’s input was a mere 2.5 percent of the total costs for which the construction company was responsible.

The low value of labor in the overall calculation thus rendered it marginal to profits in the industry while it remained a flexible expense that—unlike prices for cement, over which companies had little influence—could be negotiated downwards if profits were squeezed. I overheard a few negotiations between Sagarmatha’s chief engineer Mahatma and different labor contractors. On every single occasion the former, as a company representative, would seek to lower the agreed price by pointing to some kind of fault—a worker here who could not find his safety equipment and had therefore delayed construction; a substandard performance there, which had required extra hours to remedy; or simply skulking laborers who did not, of course, deserve full pay. Keeping construction labor outsourced added a buffer that augmented the power of project managers to keep expenses under control. While luxury construction thus, on the one hand, provoked a rise in expert labor—which added to the total labor component of construction—the informal organization of manual construction labor has in fact deepened under this new

regime of labor, precisely because it is perfectly suited to the current needs of capital. This is one of the main contradictions of the dialectical relationship between abstract value and abstract labor to emerge from the new luxury-driven construction boom in high-rises: the relative cheapening of the inputs of manual labor by keeping its organization ‘traditional,’ and allowing continued ‘absolute exploitation.’

The unique nature of the capital employed in luxury accommodation provides important clues to the perseverance and stability of this differential labor regime, which is only partially subsumed to forces of accumulation. While most of the old upscale hotels are in fact converted properties from formerly royal Rana possessions that had been amassed or gifted under the autocratic clan’s 104 years of rule (this was the elite ownership over tourism I referred to in the introduction), the post-conflict investments come from established family-owned enterprises who made their fortunes during the industrial boom of the 1990s. Cost-savvy and conservative, these shifts of profits to real estate and services reflect the limited international mobility of capital that still characterizes Nepal’s protected financial landscape, which makes it cumbersome for foreign capital to invest in the country, and illegal for domestic capital to be invested abroad for fear of undermining the state’s precarious foreign exchange balances. Hotel investors are wary, not frivolous, and definitely not adventurous, thus putting a lid on impulses to experiment with rationalizing the production process. But neither are they poor, having acquired the property well in advance of when prices were low, and it seems that investment costs are mostly equity rather than debt-based, which adds to the status-quoist nature of capital investment in tourism. It is advances of luxury accommodation, not the nature of capital (which merely acts as a lever), that is revolutionizing relations of production. To understand this, we need to look closer at what happens to labor relations after hotels have been built.

The ‘Business’ of Global Hoteliers

The incomplete subsumption of construction labor that I have just discussed contrasts with the direct and real subsumption of service laborers in luxury establishments—that is, in finished hotels. Hotel operations respond to different forces of accumulation than do dynamics of construction. The latter is entangled in local state regulation through procurement and building law, and reflects a production process that assembles diverse commodities and creates a

temporary 'urban factory.' Hotels, on the other hand, are much more geographically isolated units of production, and the chief 'commodity' they require from outside are travelers, the flow of which are only very marginally controlled by the local political economy.¹³

The 2015 earthquakes deepened the schisms between these two spaces of production, as the collapsing of fragile structures prompted the state to increase its surveillance of building standards. While the construction industry has remained in local hands, embedded in intricate networks that require deep local knowledge to navigate successfully, the high-class hotel industry was differently shaken up and loosened following the geological rumbles. Almost all luxury establishments were forced to shut down, given damages to their infrastructure; and the iconic Everest Hotel only reopened again after a lengthy retrofit in late 2019.

Following the material destruction came a fall in foreign arrivals, down 31.7 percent. When the owners of traditional properties woke up again to the post-disaster building boom, they were facing a new cohort of competitors: property developers who saw an opportunity to extend into the coveted tourism sector with their keen sense of how to build economically to new urban-class sentiments; middle-size businesses who scooped up cheap properties and transformed them into amenity-rich condos that were then sublet at a fraction of the price of expensive establishments, though often with superior facilities; and, most damaging, the handful or so of big industrialists who had grown rich in very different niches but now all declared their intention to open large rival hotels in cooperation with international premium brands, such as Hilton, Dusit-Thani, Marriott, Sheraton, and Holiday Inn.

Yet none of these global conglomerates have directly invested in Nepal's hotel sector, following in part from current trends toward leaner companies geared to more immaterial value forms. Their global push, particularly in peripheral niches, occurs through franchising and management contracts that carry little risk (but steady rewards), and for which property owners pay various fees. Capital flows out, not into Nepal, as entrants pay both for brand affiliation and for the material luxuries necessary to cater to cosmopolitan elites. But the force of branded hotels, who have all matured in much more competitive international environments, has unsettled the old establishments, and created a rush for reforms across their properties, quite unlike the stability of the construction sector.

In August 2019, I was sitting in the recently renovated reception lounge of one of Kathmandu's oldest downtown 5-star hotels, and

chatting with the newly appointed general manager. While this privately owned hotel had not signed up with an international brand like so many others, the owners had nonetheless decided to bring in management expertise from global chains to streamline the business with the increased competition from other high-value vendors. Mr. Sapkota, the new GM, had worked for Marriott for fifteen years in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia before landing in Nepal, and he had been taken aback by the colonial charms of this nineteenth-century Rana palace, which had first opened its doors to travelers during the tourism boom of the 1970s. The Nepali owners had since upgraded the facilities to compete with offerings from comparative venues—installing a swimming pool, tennis court, and training center on the large premises, and more than doubling the number of rooms—but the ‘palatial’ style had deliberately been kept to emphasize an out-of-era luxurious retreat right in the middle of the busy and noisy downtown area.

Sapkota’s tenure started in late 2017, as the first national federal elections were signaling a change to the country’s fractured political space. And while the GM comes across as carefree and jovial, he drives a hard bargain with his employees. As one of his first controversial moves, Sapkota fired the local management and brought in six new division leaders from India to oversee the restructuring of labor in the hotel. Rather than a dense layer of old managerial positions with supervisors and sub-supervisors in every small ‘department’—laundry, front office, cleaning, garden, bar, pool, and so on—the hierarchy was centralized and simplified. This had the obvious ‘lean’ advantage that fewer people were involved in distributing work, thus potentially boosting productivity. But it was also meant as a device to increase internal mobility, because as Sapkota explained, “you cannot keep somebody for five years as a front office manager . . . everybody wants to grow.” The new structure included more incremental positions, which facilitated continuous promotions and underwrote the GM’s policy of “developing people,” rather than focusing squarely on assignments. In the previous employment environment, “associates,” as Sapkota referred to his employees, used to define themselves by their area of work and to hold onto these niches as small fiefdoms of privilege. Sapkota’s mission was to instill in hotel workers a flexible attitude to work, and not just to treat it like a 9-to-5 job. When he himself had started working in hospitality twenty years earlier, he was keenly conscious of how he would have to sacrifice ordinary leisure time, such as holidays, to satisfy the needs of customers. He therefore finds it very odd that a head

of department for the banquet section would go home at 5 or 6 p.m. when there is an important social event to attend to in the evening: “I expect my HoDs,” Sapkota implored, “to be there and to show . . . I mean it’s the pride as well of a HoD, like ‘Hey see, I am the department head of this area.’ I didn’t see this, and so this didn’t work for me.”

Above all, then, Sapkota sought to break the culture of work at the hotel. Hospitality enterprises operate in segmented fields of competition. Only the handful or so other five-star establishments in Kathmandu comprised for Sapkota what GMs across the spectrum referred to as a hotel’s ‘Comp Set’ —the immediate and direct competitors for the same class of customers, against which benchmarks of performance are necessary. But the heightened competition in what used to be a smaller niche market, where each hotel had its own characteristic profile and ‘Unique Selling Point’ —the Soaltee with its spacious premises in a quiet area of town, the Radisson with its downtown casino at a convenient location, the Hyatt closer to the airport and in serene surroundings—was slowly being eroded by the arrival of streamlined and brand-operated businesses, which forced older establishments to follow suit. Sapkota’s international experience and his long stint with an American chain allowed him to compare these much more competitive markets with the situation in Nepal; and, like many others, he saw the old labor arrangements as a barrier to a more flexible, more productive, but also a more customer-oriented work culture. He was clear that bringing in new foreign supervisors was a deliberate way of “set[ting] up a new culture,” because replacing the Nepali management would make it easier for him to change what he called “the structure of work.” When he arrived, the staff-to-room ratio stood at more than 2:1, and he was trying to bring this down to 1.5:1, which would still be a good deal above what he saw as a ‘global’ standard of 1.1:1.¹⁴

The “structure” of employment in the hospitality industry developed with the growth of formal employment during the 1970s and 1980s, when state and industrial enterprises spread rapidly in tandem with the ambitious development plans of the burgeoning post-Rana *panchayat* regime. These years, during which most of the first-generation luxury establishments were formed, also saw the rise of employers’ and employees’ associations, with the Nepal Independent Hotel Workers’ Union established in 1980 during years of heightened labor militancy. Due to the great concentration of labor at luxury establishments, their high-profile locations, and the sensitivity of hotels to negative reviews that transcend moments of disruption,

the labor union was successful in wresting de facto control of labor management across different properties—a power they have continued to wield until quite recently, when the arrival of international GMs have forced a disruption of local union leaders' control of labor issues. What really irked Sapkota was less the staff-to-room ratio than his lacking space for maneuver in hiring and firing staff. He was faced with the double challenge of an extremely immobile working force at an annual turnover of less than 1 percent (compared to the 20 percent he was accustomed to), and a local union that resisted any layoffs and intervened to secure their candidates for new openings and promotions. With most hotel workers having been in the same jobs for twenty to thirty years, it was indeed a superb challenge for the new GM to disrupt the 'culture' of work without also challenging the union. He therefore consciously faced down the union representatives by refusing to meet with them without an approved agenda, and then only in small groups to break what he considered an aggressive style of demanding:

At the moment I am not dealing with any union because . . . I know unions differently. I know unions that are doing good things for the associates . . . Here, I find only egocentrism. So, at the moment, I tell them you give me an agenda and then three or four people can come. Then we can discuss something. But this is not what they want. They want to come with 10–15 people because only then do they feel strong. If they are by themselves, they are the nicest people, you know; but once they are there, 15 people together, they just . . . they are screaming, they are shouting. This is not how I want to run my hotel.

The hotel industry's struggle with labor unions is not new in Nepal, and the Hotel Association Nepal—which represent the interest of owners—has repeatedly lobbied for more 'cordial' labor relations. Conflicts between labor and hospitality enterprises, including restaurant workers, intensified during the Maoist insurgency, as they supported labor unrest across industrial sectors. Following the 2006 peace agreement when the Maoists came aboveground and started focusing on politicizing urban areas, labor actions in hotels intensified further. Some establishments, such as the Radisson, became renowned for their routine conflicts with unions; GMs were regularly chased away by militant workers, even, on one occasion, being forced to flee under the cover of night. Such stories, and fears, were shared by GMs of large establishments where the affluence of their clientele and premises contrasted markedly with the rewards of hotel workers. The huge wage gap between guests and local workers, which is

accentuated by economic inequalities between nations and requires a calculated (in)visibility of labor (Thurlow and Jaworski 2014), possibly goes a long way in accounting for why hotels in South Asia have remained profitable despite such high staff-to-room ratios compared with more competitive markets.

Sapkota was therefore not alone in considering the structure and culture of hotel labor a frontline in his struggle to upgrade a 40-year-old establishment to current performance benchmarks. Across the field of luxury accommodations, property owners were approaching international chains to hire senior staff who had experience from foreign markets. Several new GMs from abroad have been hired just within the past 2–3 years to signal this strategic shift, and many were seeking ways to break labor’s relative strength in setting terms of employment. The new Radisson GM, for instance, took a confrontational line with the union, as had Sapkota, and he fired key union representatives from his hotel—a move he himself considered to be extremely dangerous and quite unprecedented in the history of the industry. At the Hyatt, likewise, a management decision to reduce compensatory and sick leave in June 2019 led to a strike by the four hundred workers, and a temporary closure of the hotel because of what union representatives considered unprovoked ‘harassment’ of workers. These examples illustrate the extent to which the breaking of labor’s power has become a battlefield in a sectoral drive to keep luxury accommodation profitable.

The conflicts between workers and managers that I have sketched here build on contradictions that are in elementary ways internal to the tourism industry. John Urry had already pointed to a major opposition in the area of “working under the tourist gaze” as he related to how tourist experiences were based on “an expectation of the extraordinary,” but at the same time the poorly paid service workers were organized “under conditions of profit maximization” (Urry 2002: 59). Luxury hotels accentuate this contradiction because of the higher value of the product on offer, and this often requires extra emotional work—more ‘Nepali smiles’—to underline the extravagant hospitality that is essential for the ‘brand’ on offer. Naomi Klein, in her 2001 book *No Logo*, speaks of branding as the ability to use the symbolic power of imagery to reconfigure experiences of consumption so that they increasingly become mediated by visual narratives (Klein 2005). The adage that what retailers of tourism ultimately sell are not physically tangible products but rather experiences, forms a crucial component of a GM’s management perspective. Consequently, they try hard to drive down the price they must pay for service labor, while

retaining, or even elevating, its integration with the hotel brand. Such a perspective on hotel labor is generally absent from tourism studies, which, if it deals with labor at all, considers labor on its own terms as separate from the thrust of accumulation (Adler and Adler 2004); or, as has been customary for anthropologists, it explores the opposition between tourists and tourist workers (Crick 1989; Urry 2002), not between management and labor. What is interesting about luxury accommodations in this regard is that general managers, as chief executives of operations, are less managers of the property than they are of the service functions of the hotel—that is, of the total facilities that encapsulate and package the brand of high-class hotels into a commodity for paying customers—what Michael Haywood has termed a hotel’s “virtual assets” (Haywood 1998: 283). Their conflict with labor is not just one of cheapening input costs through productivity gains, but rather of being able to control the expressions of ‘service’ by tying laborers’ work more closely into the perspective of the luxury brand as an ideological expression of the alliance between capital and consuming middle classes.

Unlike in the construction sector, where luxury frontlines are promoting new hierarchies based on expertise but are otherwise relying on feudal-style networks for the bulk of labor mobilization, the service side of the boom in tourism properties has thus resulted in visible antagonisms that have the potential to become permanent rifts in the hotel sector. The new high-end hotels that opened in 2019, with their international management teams and industry-wide SOPs (standard operating procedures), are already institutionalizing a different labor regime, one that bypasses unions and formalizes the power of corporate heads. I think we can push the analysis of these distinctions even further by considering the way capital expansion articulates with different spaces of labor. Construction laborers, who chiefly circulate between rural areas and urban building sites, make up a huge ‘footloose’ mobile labor force,¹⁵ but because they remain outside formal labor market regulation their spaces of reproduction occur on the margins of the state—invisibilized and irrelevant. Or, to put it in the terms of regimes of value: because the dialectics of production and reproduction are politically and geographically separated into uneven spaces, they rarely result in tangible counterpressures by affected populations. By contrast, local construction experts are more tightly integrated into accumulation processes and receive accreditation through government-established schools for engineering, and likewise tourism service laborers through hotel and tourism diplomas. The physical mobility of the latter has been much more

limited than is the case with construction laborers, and many have worked for the same companies since they graduated. This explains the ‘stubbornness’ with which this group of workers hang on to their jobs, and the unions’ role in patrolling access for newcomers. We are thus seeing two very different effects, and different frontlines, of the same capitalist globalization, precisely because it combines two contrasting value regimes.

Conclusion

Neil Smith saw in forces of capital a “seesaw” movement of value inflation and deflation, as the constant search for value extraction drove a brutal transformation of urban landscapes across postwar US cities (Smith 2010). Such processes are also visible in many parts of South Asia, where urban metropolises have followed the paradoxical push towards growth-induced planetary slums (Davis 2006). But South Asia responds differently to value expansions of the built environment than has been the case for North America, where infrastructural expansion was, from the outset of the colonial exploration, tied to the rise of corporate capital (Bakan 2004), and where intimate links between business, buildings, and political power continue to hold sway. Tycoons in India and Nepal have not to the same degree built their empires from investments in concrete, nor from close alliances with the state apparatus, and this is particularly the case in the mountainous regions toward the north that resist fast-paced, expansive infrastructural development, and where shielded agricultural hinterlands have provided a historical buffer against centralized (but not localized) exploitation (Gellner 2008). Add to this that large-scale infrastructural expansion across this geopolitically sensitive region in both railways and roads—for the past two centuries a recurring battlefield between expansive British, Nepalese, Chinese, and Indian impulses—is coordinated and often built directly by specialized departments of the military. Tellingly, Nepal’s most successful industrialist, and one of the new investors in extravagant accommodation, built his fortunes from instant noodles, a low-profile apolitical commodity. In a region where the majority of the population have very limited purchasing power, and the state controls key infrastructural industries, the space for capitalist creativity differs from the experience of North Atlantic economies.

This suggests that we should be careful with uncritically universalizing Smith’s US-based analysis of how to think about value

frontiers and uneven geography. In crucial ways, the development of the urban building mass remains disaggregated from control of the crucial transport infrastructure on which it depends, and it is therefore only recently that any significant investment in this sector has occurred, with tourism accommodation acting as a kind of test case for the business durability of real estate. Apart from empirical differences between the United States and northern South Asia, this also points to a limit in Smith's assumption that urban regeneration necessarily results from the "restlessness" of capital. The capital I have considered is not an anonymous blunt force of accumulation but is tied to specific social projects and industrial energies. Rather than 'restless,' this socially and institutionally conditioned capital is better understood as ambitious but conservative, as it seeks not just to increment value but to build status and lasting enterprises. Nepal's tourism capital partakes in several supplementary outcomes, ranging from using hotel investment to protect profits from political tribute payments (through taxation or otherwise), to over-parking of industrial profits while waiting for better investment opportunities (in which case hospitality is better understood as a form of banking), to using expensive infrastructure as a monument to previous accomplishments (where it functions more like a payment or luxury commodity in itself). In each of these cases, capital investment does more (but never less) than conform to Marx's formula for capital circulation, M-C-M, which is the heart of the 'profit motive.' These added social projects of capital can help explain why some value frontlines become more confrontational than others; and even why, in some cases, unique alliances between hotel owners and workers can momentarily stabilize themselves over the protection of 'traditional values.'

In this chapter, I have offered an analysis of luxury tourism as a frontline in the unfolding of capitalist globalization. It is a moment that, on the one hand, unites the supply and demand of new segments of classed travelers from Asian countries with the continued domination of the US hospitality sector. Nepal's frenzied hotel expansion is lifted from a Euro-American experience, and most of the new general managers in the industry have European origins and extensive experiences from Western brands. It will be interesting to see how long this 'hybridity' will last. But it expresses more generally the struggle over Nepal's political future by rivalling Chinese, Indian, and US diplomats, a struggle that takes place on all levels of political life, and which has only increased with the rise of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi. On the other hand, the production of a revamped

hospitality industry that charts new paths for operations of infrastructural capital in Nepal is a compound of 'local' factors, of nascent industrial capital battling 'historical' royal privileged classes, while colluding to mobilize labor, across different projects and through different political economic alliances, to produce the value that 'luxury' requires for it to run smoothly. These are frontlines riven with tensions of pressures and counterpressures, at all levels of operations. I have highlighted two, in particular: first, the growth of a 'quasi-aristocratic' class of engineers, which puts increasing downward pressure on manual construction labor through a retention, and thereby deepening, of traditional 'feudal' subcontracting procedures; and secondly, a wholesale disruption of hospitality's labor arrangements with both union power and the 'cultural' values of work as concrete institutions to be remade according to Euro-American hegemonic (i.e., neoliberal) norms.

To what extent will these altered regimes of value become gateways for wider institutional changes in the Himalayan region? This depends, I would suggest, both on the success of the current hospitality moment and on the entrenchment of the new generation of elites, cosmopolitan and secular, in Nepal's political fabric. Large-scale hotel construction has charted a development that is largely irreversible, given the way it has managed to combine an image of earthquake-safety with middle-class consumerist aspirations in a squeezed land market. This will gradually put engineers in the driving seat of infrastructural development, at least of the politically non-critical kind, even if the 'frivolity' of luxury tourism turns out to be a dead end for capital. The consequences for labor, however, depend more on the possibilities for superseding the steady spread of neoliberal 'middle-class' values, which is undermining the traditional unions that have emerged under the political patronage of the *panchayat* years. This, in turn, requires a new political compact and a renewed left movement, which at this point is not very likely with the overall discrediting of socialism in Nepal after the sellout of the erstwhile Maoists. Will a new elite be able to challenge the caste-based organization of the entire political system and pave the way for an 'enlightened,' 'bourgeois,' revolution? Not likely, given the dependence of this elite on the politico-economic infrastructure of the Indian landscape, itself undergoing a massive democratic crisis. And unlike at the takeoff of the Maoist moment in the early 1990s, Nepal's subaltern classes will find it hard to unite with comrades in India, where the 'subaltern moment' has been crushed too, at the same time as the history of Chinese Maoism is being sanitized to the

point where it has become a capitalist ruling ideology, rather than a critical pedagogy of revolution. The value struggles set in motion by luxury tourism's push to open new markets thus result in new contradictions that will shape relations between capital, class, and labor for a long time to come.

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Notes

1. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of travelers rose from 440 million to 1.4 billion, and today accounts for around 10.3% of global GDP. Figures are from UNWTO and WTTC websites.
2. In the same 30-year period, the share of global arrivals in the Asia and Pacific region have increased from 12.8 to 24.4% (Roser 2017).
3. This study started in 2015 as an investigation into the precarious livelihoods of migrating working classes in the construction industry, for which I carried out seven months of fieldwork with day laborers on and off construction sites in Kathmandu. From late 2017, I began focusing on the organization and investment of urbanized infrastructure. Fieldwork during the summer of 2018 and 2019 allowed me to explore more closely the economy of investments in luxury hotels, and its relationship to the existing premium accommodation market. This second part of the research has been carried out with tourism promoters, investors, construction companies, and hotel operators combining interviews and participant observations. I thank the Danish Research Council and the University of Bergen for financial support.
4. Arrivals have been steadily rising since 2015, which marked the end of a prolonged post-conflict recovery from a decade (1996–2006) of violent conflict between Maoist insurgents and a fragile state apparatus.
5. For the Mediterranean, see Boissevain 1996, and Hazbun 2008; for the Caribbean and related US peripheries, see Adler and Adler 2004, Brenner and Aguilar 2002, and Bryden 1973; for South East Asia, see Coles 2008 and Richter 1982, 1989.
6. Because of an open border with India, it is possible to travel between the two countries without a visa, and this in turn allows Indian citizens to visit Nepal—including the important historic Buddhist site of Lumbini, which is right on the border but on Nepal territory. It is therefore generally assumed that the actual number of tourists from India visiting Nepal is much higher than enumerated for the tourist visa scheme.
7. But only relative. As I document in a forthcoming book, the stability of the NCP-

- dominated state apparatus and the political signals they have sent since coming to power in January 2018 have been central in propping up investor confidence, even if the state has not been eager to support the industry financially.
8. The names of companies and people participating in the research have been anonymized, as has, in some cases, participants' genders in order to blur recognition.
 9. There are no official data on hotel's revenue compositions, but it was well known in the industry that the so-called F&B market (Food & Beverage) is very high in Kathmandu compared to European and American markets. One general manager for a newly opened hotel with a background in the Indian hotel industry claimed that this was the case throughout South Asia due to regional religious, kin, and festivity cultures. Several of the key personnel I interviewed from a range of top hotels claimed that their F&B revenues accounted for at least 30 percent of their earnings, in many cases 50 percent, and in a few special cases they were even higher. This is important to keep in mind when discussing the links between hotels and tourism, because the former are not completely dependent on the travel industry—a fact borne out during the Covid-19 pandemic, when some hotels were able to remain open and break even without income from their rooms.
 10. The number of privately registered vehicles, according to the Department of Transport Management, grew from just over half a million in 2006/07 to over 3 million by mid-2018; and in 2018, five times as many vehicles were registered annually as had been the case one decade earlier.
 11. According to the Nepal Land & Housing Developers' Association, this chronic scarcity is further aggravated by an annual demand for 140,000 new houses in Nepal when only 25,000 are being built. A staggering 42 percent of this demand is in the Kathmandu Valley.
 12. I offer a more detailed analysis of this labor regime in an article on labor stops for construction workers in Kathmandu (Hirslund 2019).
 13. This flow is controlled, more directly, by international travel agents that are themselves often owned by large multinational corporations, which may at the same time have stakes in airline companies and other hotel chains. See Michael Clancy (2011) for a discussion of some of these major global commodity chains in tourism. Such a GCD analysis, unfortunately, does not at present exist for Nepal.
 14. The 1.1 employee-per-room ratio is in fact more likely an American standard, though of course this ratio rises with the star-rating of the property. Across the early 2000s, five-star hotels in Rome recorded a ratio of 1.2–1.3:1, whereas the Indian market is very similar to Nepal's with a 2.7:1 ratio for luxury properties. The Intercontinental Hotel Group has explained that they employ twice the ratio in India compared to the US for the same standard of hotel.
 15. The reference here is to Jan Breman's work on agricultural laborers in the Indian state of Gujarat who lost their livelihoods in the agricultural economy but were unable to establish themselves permanently in the new industrialized sector on the urban fringes, and therefore had to resort to an existence of permanent seasonal mobility, informality, and even invisibility (Breman 1996). Construction laborers in Nepal, as I have also documented elsewhere (Hirslund 2019), have much in common with the ongoing dispossession of rural livelihoods across India due to the open border between the two countries, which has turned the entire Gagentin Plain into one continuous accumulation regime (Sugden 2017).

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DISPOSSESSION AS A MANIFOLD

Frontlines of Authoritarian Populist Politics in Turkey

Katharina Bodirsky



Introduction

On the evening of 15 July 2016, jet planes started to circle over the roofs of Istanbul and Ankara. At the time, the sense of crisis was already profound. War in the southeast of Turkey had been ongoing for about one year. The Kurdish population was dispossessed when their cities were turned to rubble. Academics had been persecuted, as alleged supporters of terrorism, for signing a petition that denounced the violence. Various bombings in the urban centers, attributed to ISIS or the PKK, had cost hundreds of lives; among them was an attack on a peace demonstration in October 2015, organized by Kurdish and leftist organizations, where more than one hundred people died. The jets circling over our heads were in a sense an extension of that experience of violent crisis. It soon turned out, however, that they formed part of something that few, if any, had expected, as the military was presumed to have been weakened: a coup. Thousands of people followed the call by President Erdoğan to take to the streets, and hundreds were killed that night. The coup failed.

The Turkish government attributed the coup attempt to the Gülen movement—now termed FETÖ (Fethullahist terror organization).¹ The state of emergency declared shortly thereafter, and renewed periodically until July 2018, was presented however as part of a more general fight against terror, and for national security. This opened the door for the persecution not only of Gülenists, but also

the wider opposition. The Kurdish political movement in particular was targeted, but also various others on the socialist or liberal Left, as well as Kemalists.² More than 130,000 people were dismissed from the public sector, and thousands of institutions were closed down by state of emergency decrees, with tens of thousands arrested on terror charges.

While the state of emergency seemingly instituted a ‘state of exception,’ it was far from exceptional. For one, it formed part of a longer history of state violence, governance by decree, and state remaking in Turkey (Akça 2014; Bodirsky 2021; Gökarıksel and Türem 2019; Jongerden 2018; Küçük and Özselçuk 2019). Moreover, its governance by decree was rendered permanent by the institution of a presidential system in 2018, when the state of emergency formally ended.

The Turkish state of exception was also not exceptional when viewed against international developments. Illiberal governments in countries such as Hungary and Poland engaged in similar practices of repressing the opposition, exchanging state personnel, and remaking the state. New illiberal alliances have been forming in Europe (Kalb 2018) and beyond (Öniş 2017; Öniş and Kutlay 2020) in the context of a crisis of (neo)liberalism. Turkey is thus a frontline space that exemplifies more general political tendencies in contemporary capitalist societies.

Political scientists have thus discussed in recent years whether Turkey is now best seen as an instance of a broader shift to competitive authoritarianism or illiberal democracy (among other terms). In contrast to their focus on political institutions and practices in the narrower sense (e.g., Arat and Pamuk 2019; Castaldo 2018, Esen and Gumuscu 2016), Stuart Hall’s perspective on authoritarian populist hegemony lends itself to an anthropological analysis of the wider social field in which such political developments are embedded, and the frontlines of value that drive them. It focuses attention on the valuation-based alliances underpinning a hegemonic project, and its attempts to generate consent to an encompassing strategy of social transformation and state remaking, and helps us unearth the politics of a contemporary authoritarian populist value regime.

When using the term ‘authoritarian populism’ in the contemporary conjuncture that brought a populist, illiberal right to the fore (Scoones et al. 2018), I do not seek to establish a historical parallel with Thatcherism, which inspired Hall’s coining of the term. While Thatcherism is generally associated with the rollout of neoliberal policy and politics, contemporary populist projects are in part a

reaction against it. They gain their specificity from a conjuncture that is defined by a neoliberal global capitalism in and of crisis, and a pushback against former, often (neo)liberal, state elites. In that sense, they involve and seek to construct different value regimes. What I am interested in is thus not historical comparison in view of the substance of particular policies, but in highlighting a particular *kind* of hegemonic strategy that harnesses frontlines of value in specific ways.

In examining contemporary politics within a broader field of force, I build on a substantive literature that analyses politics in Turkey through a Gramscian lens (Akça et al 2014, Balkan et al 2015, Bozkurt 2013), but focus to a greater extent on the manifold practices of dispossession that go into the shoring up of a hegemonic project. Contemporary authoritarian populist hegemonic projects employ both economic and wider social forms of valuation for alliance formation. The politics of dispossession in this context targets in particular those outside the alliance at any point in time. I use the term ‘dispossession’ to refer to the act of taking away or withholding something that is of value to the dispossessed.³ This includes but is not limited to the material. Thus, anthropologists have highlighted multiple dimensions of dispossession—economic, political, social—and examined how they come together in the shaping of political processes (Carbonella and Kasmir 2015, Kalb 2009). Dispossession in this regard encompasses both social reproduction and social worth; processes of expropriation, stigmatization, and disenfranchisement.⁴ It is a “manifold”: it comprises “a totality of interconnected processes” or “bundles of relationships” (Wolf 1982: 1).⁵ Practices of dispossession are thus generally tied into long-standing histories of (de)valuation—of capital as well as the state (Bodirsky 2021)—that hegemonic projects can activate for their strategies of generating consent, establishing control, and achieving social transformation. For instance, experiences—or fears—of dispossession have played an important role in constituting support for the illiberal Right in Europe (Edwards et al. 2012; Edwards et al. 2017, Gingrich 2006, Gökariksel 2017, Kalb and Halmai 2011, Koch 2017, Szombati 2018). In turn, authoritarian populist projects actively engage in new and intensified acts of dispossession.

The value(s) dispossessed serve(s) the enrichment of others. Just as dispossession is manifold, so is the resulting enrichment: it encompasses not only material wealth and opportunities for accumulation but also a recalibration of the scales of hierarchical social worth and the means to realize particular ‘civilizational’ values through

state-led social transformation. In that sense, the current hegemonic project analyzed is also a project of manifold enrichment of (new) elites that partially extends to allied subordinate populations. The following first lays out the conceptual framework of the argument, and then outlines the manifold practices of dispossession during the state of emergency in Turkey. It situates these within the longer historical trajectory of frontlines of value leading up to the recent use of dispossession as a political tool. The latter serves to shore up the authoritarian populist hegemonic project, it is argued, but it also entails contradictions that constitute a challenge for its continuity. Future hegemonic projects will have to contend with the residues of state remaking and polarization that authoritarian populist politics leaves behind.

Authoritarian Populism, Hegemony, and Dispossession

In developing the notion of authoritarian populism, Stuart Hall's objective was to analyze

the new form of hegemonic politics which emerged on the British scene with the formation of the 'new right' in the mid-1970s. It described a shift in the balance of social and political forces and in the forms of political authority and social regulation institutionalized in society through the state. It involved an attempt to shift the gravity in society and the state closer to the 'authoritarian' pole of regulation. . . . However, the 'populist' part of the strategy requires that this move to new forms of social authority and regulation 'above' should be rooted in popular fears and anxieties 'below'. Central to this movement . . . was that the shift to greater social discipline should be made while retaining intact the formal paraphernalia of the liberal-democratic state. (Hall 1988: 84, emphasis added)

When using the term 'authoritarian populist' as a qualifier for a particular kind of hegemonic project, I pick up on these key elements of the definition: the authoritarian move in remaking the state while maintaining the semblance of representative democracy, as well as the populist consent sought of (only parts of) the population, in our case particularly by activating histories of dispossession, all within a project of gaining and maintaining power by a particular, and partially shifting, alliance of social forces.

My interest in the term thus derives primarily from a concern with political strategy, not with Thatcherism as such, which differed in important ways from the contemporary populist Right. Most notably, the Thatcherite project of state remaking served a project of

neoliberalization. In turn, the populist Right today rose to power in a context where neoliberalism seemed firmly entrenched, albeit in crisis. The continuous production of crisis and of dispossession that neoliberalism entailed for large parts of the population contributed to an anger against (neo)liberal state elites which the populist, illiberal Right could canalize (Kalb 2011; Maskovsky and Bjork-James 2020). Thus, contemporary authoritarian populisms can be seen as a partial reaction to the world that Thatcherism helped to build. It involves a value regime that entails hybrid strategies of engagement with neoliberal global capitalism, including measures of state capitalism according to some analysts (e.g., Öniş 2019), within a project of social transformation and enrichment that harnesses multiple value(s) in the making of alliances, and builds to a greater extent on state— rather than market-driven dispossession.⁶

Hall emphasized that the term ‘authoritarian populism’ needed to form part of an analysis of hegemonic politics (1988: 150, 154). He described political projects as “hegemonic” if they seek “to renovate society as a whole” (ibid.: 91). This requires making (and at times breaking) strategic alliances with different social forces, dominant and subordinate ones, through political and ideological as well as economic means, building on various markers of valuation, not only class (ibid.: 7–8). Such a hegemonic project requires an economic nucleus (Gramsci 2000: 212); that is, a degree of control over (capitalist) forms of value accumulation and distribution. And it requires control over the state apparatus, which is “clearly absolutely central in articulating the different areas of contestation, the different points of antagonism, into a regime of rule” (Hall 1988: 168). A hegemonic project is thus also a project of state remaking. Here, Gramsci’s differentiation (Gramsci 2000: 234–36) between the state in the narrow sense (institutions of the political system so-defined) and in the general sense (encompassing the wider realm of civil society) is relevant. A successful hegemonic project targets both the narrow and the integral state. This has been a hallmark of recent authoritarian populism not only in Turkey, but also in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and, to lesser extent, the United States.

In coining the notion of authoritarian populism, Stuart Hall modified Poulantzas’s notion of authoritarian statism, which referred to the “intensification of state control over every sphere of economic life combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called ‘formal liberties’” (Hall 1988: 126), while maintaining the appearance of the liberal-democratic state (ibid.: 84). The political science notion

of competitive authoritarianism today captures some of this: it refers to an authoritarian state (merely) legitimized by regular elections. In replacing Poulantzas's "statism" with "populism," Hall in turn wanted to highlight the crucial role of popular consent in this process. Thatcherism, he noted, was able "to harness to its project certain popular discontents" (ibid.: 6; see also pp. 50, 55) and "aligned itself with 'what some of the people really want', while at the same time continuing to dominate them" (ibid.: 6). This connects concretely to the various senses of value involved in contemporary frontlines, and would also ring true if we replaced Thatcherism with Trumpism, Orbánism, or the like.

Popular consent for Hall does not mean the absence of coercion. Rather, coercion can become "the natural and routine form in which consent is secured" (Hall 1988: 30). This is a particularly prominent feature of authoritarian populist projects, which aim at only a *strategic* measure of consent (ibid.: 7), partly achieved through coercion. It helps to explain the use of dispossession as a political tool within a hegemonic project. Authoritarian populist politics works through an active process of polarization that separates the 'true' people presumably consenting from various internal and external Others to be disciplined by force. In the case of Turkey today, the language of anti-terror brands nearly half of the population as potential or actual terrorists, including but also extending beyond the Kurdish population, who had long been devalued and violently repressed in the Turkish state (Aras 2014, Yonucu 2017).

Such political polarization is in fact the surface appearance of a particular process of making and breaking alliances that underpins a struggle for hegemony. Value and values play a central role in this (Bodirsky 2021). As Gramsci (2000: 211–12) pointed out, hegemony has both "ethico-political" and "economic" dimensions. Both economic value and ethico-political values play a role in sustaining the alliance that carries the hegemonic project at any given point in time. In turn, those outside the alliance—in particular in authoritarian populism—are subjected to devaluation and dispossession.

A key dimension of recent practices of dispossession in Turkey is economic: they produce wagelessness and enable the accumulation of capital. A duality of dispossession and accumulation is of course fundamental to any capitalist social order (Marx [1867] 1990), and renders the specter of "wagelessness" (Carbonella and Kasmir 2015: 45) a fundamental problem for those without means of production. David Harvey (2003) highlighted that such practices of "accumulation

by dispossession” often involve state law and coercion, and are central to neoliberal capitalism. The Turkish case shows that practices of dispossession generate resources for the state that can then be redistributed strategically to maintain alliances underpinning the hegemonic project. While this indirectly serves capital accumulation and also produces wagelessness, its immediate purpose is political. It serves the redistribution of resources within relations of clientelism and for popular support. This in turn helps buttress a broader project of enrichment, including material wealth, but also social worth and political power.

Just like enrichment, dispossession also goes beyond the economic. As Carbonella and Kasmir (2015) point out, economic dispossession has manifold repercussions for the production of difference and for related processes of disorganizing the working class. Practices of dispossession can also *directly* target values that organize the attribution of social worth and shape social relationalities (Bodirsky 2021). That is, people can be dispossessed of the capacity to live positive social relations through practices of stigmatization, isolation, hierarchy and domination, or experiences of alienation. Ethnographic studies have examined, for example, the loss of socialist forms of sociality and the devaluation of related subjectivities in the supposed transition to a capitalist modernity (Berdahl 1999; Dunn 2004), which entailed large-scale accumulation by dispossession. As Don Kalb (2009) has shown, the dispossession of workers in postsocialist Poland jointly entailed economic deprivation, denial of social worth, and loss of political control.

Practices of dispossession thus also target people’s capacity to shape the conditions of their lives politically, be this in the work environment, through formal political institutions, or through social organization and mobilizations of various sorts (Gill 2016). Such processes of dispossession are not limited to violent states. The experience of being dispossessed of any real influence or say in the political process in liberal democracies has also been important in the success of the populist Right. This success in turn has paved the way for a further narrowing of the political space, and another round of political dispossessions.

Economic, social, and political dimensions of dispossession are variously imbricated in the political process of constituting hegemony and, in that sense, “manifold.” Authoritarian populist hegemonic projects politically activate histories of devaluation and dispossession for the generation of consent and their own agenda of dispossession (Bodirsky 2021). They actively employ dispossession

for shoring up the hegemonic project in moments of crisis and in remaking the state for their purpose of enrichment.

Manifold Dispossession

Umut was no longer able to sleep at night, as the emergency decrees were often published in the middle of the night. They carried lists with names, national ID numbers, and workplaces of people to be dismissed from their state jobs: barred from any other state employment, deprived of a livelihood. Those on the list were accused of being a security threat to the country. Umut was afraid that her husband might be on the next list. Or the list thereafter. He was one of the more than one thousand academics who had signed a petition condemning the violence against the Kurdish population in the Turkish Southeast in the fall and winter of 2015, and requesting the Turkish government to re-enter negotiations. Unlike many of his colleagues in other universities, he had not lost his job yet in the backlash against the petitioners, who were publicly branded as supporters of terror. He suffered from being disinvited from conferences, and taken out of shared research projects as a consequence of being an *imzacı*, a signatory of the petition. He had not lost his job yet, but that might still happen. Many of the *imzacı* were on the lists. Umut's salary from her work at an NGO was not sufficient for the family to get by, let alone to get the kids through high school. And who knew whether the institution she worked at would be closed by emergency decree in the next weeks or months? If her husband's name appeared on the next list, there might be a short window of opportunity to try and get to the airport in time before their passports were canceled. Their suitcases were packed just in case. But they did not want to leave—did not want to leave family and friends behind, home, the shared struggle.

Every day, at around the same time, Mustafa got dressed for work. But instead of leaving the house, he would sit in the living room, waiting. He waited for someone to come by—former colleagues, possibly—and arrest him for something that he had not done, though he did not know what exactly that might be. He had already lost his job by emergency decree. Now he was branded as a terrorist and traitor, despite serving as policeman for the past twenty years and more. If they thought him guilty, he demanded to at least be arrested and charged. Then he could have an opportunity to defend himself—if he could learn in the first place what exactly he was accused of. But

no one came. Day after day he sat and waited; dressed, shaved, so that his children would not see him letting himself down. His wife left for her cleaning job each morning. He stayed. His options were limited. He was prevented by decree from working in the private security sector. And who would hire him anyway, marked out as he was? Their savings would not last much longer. Family was helping out as much as they could. But how long could this last?

Umut and Mustafa are fictitious—but their experiences are not. The experiences attributed to them here are the experiences of hundreds of thousands of people in Turkey in recent years that are all different and unique, but nonetheless shared: experiences of dispossession; the loss of political say, livelihood, home and hope; the fear for family and friends.

These experiences had precedents in the preceding years and even decades, even though on a narrower scale. The state of emergency generalized this experience to a large part of the population. Only about a week after the coup attempt, a first emergency decree—KHK 667⁷—was issued that closed over two thousand institutions: schools and dormitories, universities, hospitals and health centers, associations from areas such as culture, education, and social work, and unions. A few days later, KHK 668 dismissed close to seventeen hundred state employees from their posts, and closed about 130 media institutions. This happened so quickly that it was rumored that the lists—each about fifty pages long—must have been prepared before the coup.

The publishing of KHKs, often with similar lists, continued periodically during the state of emergency. Thousands of institutions, in particular from the areas of education, health, culture, and media, were closed down.⁸ By the end of the two-year period, 49 private health-care institutions such as hospitals, 15 universities, close to 1,500 private educational institutions for children and youth, 847 private student dormitories, 178 media outlets, close to 1,500 associations,⁹ 145 foundations,¹⁰ and 19 workers' unions had been shut down by KHK.

Among the total of about 130,000 public sector employees dismissed by KHK were teachers, professors, medical doctors and other health personnel, judges and prosecutors, employees of various ministries, and of course military and police.¹¹ The last list, attached to KHK 701, dismissed a record eighteen thousand workers. By that time, the international media were not even reporting on it anymore. The exception had become routine—not, however, for those affected. The threat of dispossession that the KHK lists embodied had been

hanging over the heads of a large part of the Turkish population for years, setting a mood of anxiety and hopelessness. This dispossession was manifold: it not only threatened to take away livelihoods, social standing, and a social and cultural infrastructure, but also political say and control, not least through the far-reaching legal changes that resulted from the KHKs.

A dismissal or closure by KHK entailed no legal proceedings, only a general claim that the respective person or institution had links to a terrorist organization or constituted any other threat to national security. There was no formal accusation, no evidence, no trial—just the appearance of one's name on a list. The closed-down institutions and the dismissed personnel—popularly called *KHKlı*—never learned the exact grounds of suspicion (if there were any), so they could not formally defend themselves or remedy their situation by legal means. While, presumably under pressure from the Council of Europe, the government eventually set up an inquiry commission to which the *KHKlı* could submit their complaints, that agency was severely understaffed.¹²

The closures by KHK enabled the generation of funds for the state: assets, land titles, real estate, movables, and documents of foundations closed by KHK were transferred to the General Directorate of Foundations. The property of other institutions went to the Treasury. What then happened to those assets is obscure. KHK 670 mentions that private education institutions can be allocated to public ones, and there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that, for example, the equipment of health centers went to state hospitals. But there is no public information available on the details of these transactions or on the value that accrued in the Treasury in consequence.

In addition to the institutions closed down by KHK, more than a thousand private companies with a total value of reportedly over 60 billion lira, and the individual property of 125 individuals, were confiscated and handed over for trusteeship and possible sale to the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF), again based on the suggestion that their owners had links to terror organizations. The TMSF has been selling off many of these assets, achieving sales prices from several tens of thousands to more than one billion Turkish lira.¹³ The revenues obtained through such sales go to the Ministry of Finance (KHK 674). There is no transparency as to the total amount of revenue generated in this way, or as to what happens to the funds subsequently.¹⁴

Many livelihoods were affected by these closures and confiscations. The dismissals by KHK targeted them even more directly. To

understand their political effects, it is important to see that these were not the kind of dismissals that are ‘normal’ in a market economy. As they took place under the heading of “fight against terror and for national security,” they stigmatized the dismissed as (supporters of) terrorists. Appearing on the list also had consequences beyond losing one’s public sector job, as the *KHKl* were barred from working in the private sector too: dismissed judges and prosecutors were not allowed to work as independent lawyers; dismissed security personnel were barred from working in the private security sector; and thousands of teachers lost their work permits. Retirement pensions were revoked. The dismissed were to be evicted from public housing. Their personal property could be confiscated. Their passports—as well as at times the passports of their spouses—were revoked. And so on.

Barred from state employment, not being able to rely on any state benefits, and hindered in finding a job in the private sector, among other reasons because of the stigma of being thought a traitor and terrorist, the *KHKl* were also prevented from leaving the country in search for a livelihood. The specter of wagelessness that always haunts those who need to sell their labor power in a capitalist market economy was here particularly harrowing. The *KHKl* were clearly to be dispossessed of any means of livelihood and thrown back on the support of family and friends. Some, such as teachers, received aid via institutions such as the union *Eğitim Sen*. Others found informal channels of employment such as cab driving or doing translations. All of this required stable social relations and networks preceding the dismissal. This was not in all cases available, as economic dispossession could go hand in hand with social dispossession.

Social dispossession was not a mere side effect of economic dispossession but was probably intended: the dismissed appeared on the publicly published lists with full name, place of work, and often even their complete national ID number. Everyone could access this information.¹⁵ While many in urban centers could indeed find solidarity and support among oppositional circles, those in social environments that were largely supportive of the government experienced ostracism due to the stigma of being *KHKl*. Some suicides were attributed directly to this stigma and harassment, and the social isolation it produced.

In addition, the *KHKl* were threatened with political dispossession. Ahead of the municipal elections of 2019, key political figures demanded to bar *KHKl* from voting. After the elections, several of the successful candidates (often from the pro-Kurdish HDP/BDP)

were not allowed to take office because they were *KHKli*. Instead, the candidates who were second in line—often from the nationally governing Justice and Development Party (AKP)—took office. This chimed with a wider process of dispossession in the form of disposing elected mayors on terror charges. During the state of emergency, about a hundred elected mayors, mostly in the southeast and from the pro-Kurdish HDP, had already been replaced by trustee governors, a practice that continued after the state of emergency ended. Many oppositional politicians, in particular from the HDP, were imprisoned on terror charges.

Thus, the *KHKli* were dispossessed from their livelihoods and sometimes from their savings and assets. They were dispossessed from any opportunity to remedy their situation, be it by seeking other formal employment or by leaving the country legally to try their chances elsewhere. Many were dispossessed socially—avoided, harassed, stigmatized. Given that many of the *KHKli* worked in occupations that traditionally have been held in high regard in Turkey, this also meant a new denial of status. People were unmoored, many experienced a kind of social or civic death (Özyürek and Özdemir 2019). And they were dispossessed politically, lacking recourse to legal action. Both their passive and active rights of representation were challenged and in part revoked.

Beyond the political effects of dismissals and closures, the state of emergency also allowed for other processes of political dispossession that affected all, not only the *KHKli*. For instance, KHK 678 made it possible to forbid any strike if it was considered bad for public health, national security, public transportation, services of the municipality, or economic and financial stability in the banking system.¹⁶ Not coincidentally, workers protesting their work conditions during the construction of Istanbul's third airport were called traitors and terrorists. Critical journalism was undermined by legal changes that forbade reporting on terrorist acts in a way that would serve the interest of the terrorists (KHK 680)—a notoriously wide field of possible accusations. And looming above all of this was the longer-standing goal of the government to effect a change to a presidential system, which was now pushed through during the state of emergency, institutionalizing governance by decree. All of this contributed to a frequent experience of being dispossessed of one's country and one's future.

The Longer Historical Trajectory

The politics of dispossession in contemporary Turkey is not unprecedented. Nonetheless, the question arises why we see such stark practices of dispossession at this point in time. To address this, we need to take a look at the frontlines of value shaping Turkish politics in the preceding decades.

The AKP, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at its head,¹⁷ came to power in 2002 on the back of a period of political and economic instability in the 1990s and the economic crisis of 2001. The Turkish population experienced insecurity and dispossession in this period, such as through inflation. This provides one explanation for why people in the subsequent decades have valued the promise of security and economic growth by a strong, one-party government (Kurt 2018). In this context, the AKP intensified—with the help of the IMF and the EU—a pre-existing neoliberalizing agenda that also appealed to the more established Kemalist capital, even though the AKP was primarily associated with a rising conservative Muslim bourgeoisie (Akçay 2018: 5; Akça 2014: 31; Balkan et al 2015; Bozkurt 2013).

This was also a period of public polarization between secularism and Islam. This divide—however much constructed (Arat-Koç 2018; Demiralp 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2002)—expressed grievances of conservative populations, who felt discriminated against by a Kemalist state¹⁸ and in everyday interactions (Shively 2014); and self-identified seculars had fears of an Islamic takeover. The AKP here initially promised a politically liberalizing agenda. This appealed not only to conservative Muslim populations, but also to some on the liberal Left who had been critical of the Kemalist state; others continued to fear a hidden agenda of Islamization. The promise of liberalization was also key to entering the EU accession process. A central issue here was ‘the Kurdish question’ in the wake of the violence of the 1990s. The Kurdish population had historically been devalued in the Turkish state, and were subject to violence in an extended state of emergency before the AKP came to power. Even though the AKP initially accorded some cultural rights, the AKP continued to sideline the Kurdish political movement, and differentiated between the ‘good Kurd’ to be included in citizenship on the basis of Sunni-Islam, and the ‘bad Kurd’ to be targeted for repression (Akça 2014: 43–44).

Toward the end of the 2000s, the relation with the EU and the liberal Left cooled, and it became apparent that a longer-standing project of ‘reversal’ (for Turkey, see e.g., White 2002; Tuğal 2009) had been in full swing. This involved first and foremost the unmaking of

the Kemalist state (Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Jongerden 2018; Küçük and Özselçuk 2019), including an exchange of state elites and the further concentration of power in the executive. It also entailed a social project promoting conservative values (Bozkurt 2013; Yazıcı 2012) that undid some elements of Kemalist secularism, and transformed welfarism. Lastly, the neoliberal agenda was appropriated selectively, with considerable state power wielded through institutions such as the state housing agency TOKI, and the newly instituted and highly untransparent Sovereign Wealth Fund (Öniş and Kutlay 2020). This project of state remaking was framed as a reunion of the people and the state, in opposition to the previous government by elites, at the same time as it harked back to an imagery of Ottoman greatness.

The project of reversal was to entrench new elites and relations of power, and was carried by a shifting alliance underpinning the ongoing hegemonic project. The AKP, with charismatic leader Erdoğan as political head of the alliance, was very apt at making and breaking ties as the exigencies of the moment required, such as with parts of the liberal Left, the Gülen movement, some elements of Kurdish politics, and most recently far-right nationalists (Toktamis 2019). It was able to strengthen its ties both with sectors of capital and with parts of the working classes, in particular in the informal sector, through 'neoliberal populism' (Akçay 2018; Bozkurt 2013). This concept refers to a combination of 'neoliberal' elements such as tight monetary policy, fiscal austerity, the privatization of state enterprises, and the liberalization of labor markets with 'populist' improvements in access to health care, conditional cash transfers to poor households, and improved access to credit. The conservative middle classes in turn were brought into the alliance not least through measures such as the lifting of the headscarf ban in universities, and related promises of upward mobility. The close links between some sectors of capital and the government were no secret: companies with family links to government figures received valuable tenders and the like (Arat and Pamuk 2019: 157; Esen and Gumuscu 2016, Jongerden 2018:7; Öniş and Kutlay 2020).

The construction business was an 'engine' (Balaban 2016) of this process: it quite literally contributed to the construction of hegemony. First off, construction was central to the economic growth that had initially propelled Erdoğan's popularity. It increased within a few years from around 5 percent to nearly 9 percent of GDP in 2017 (Öniş and Kutlay 2020: 18); some argue that if directly related industries are also taken into account, it could be closer to 30 percent.¹⁹ Moreover, market research emphasizes that the sector has been

growing continuously since 2009, after a brief slump during the 2008 global financial crisis.

Moreover, it is no secret that there are close relations between the construction and real estate sector and the AKP government. Öniş and Kutlay (2020: 18) note among others that “the construction sector has become a key area of rent extraction, which helped enormously to create a new economic elite loyal to the government.” Çavuşoğlu and Strutz (2014: 151) similarly point out that major subcontracting construction firms, the “TOKI princes,” have “close ideological and family relations to the AKP.” State investment in the urban environment and rural infrastructure benefited them directly. Thus, the construction-urbanization-financialization complex was central to the economic ‘nucleus’ of hegemony, and underpinned the formation of alliances with dominant social forces.²⁰

This complex, moreover, served to create links with subordinate populations, and exemplifies the workings of insidious capital. State investment in infrastructure and mega-projects such as Istanbul’s third airport undergirded the—always contested and fragile—claims of Turkey to belonging to (a developed capitalist) modernity. Financial inclusion (Güngen 2018) and debt-financed construction (Balaban 2016) produced a general sense of economic development under the AKP government. More people were able to afford housing via mortgages, and the market share of the residential construction sector was above 50 percent.²¹ The state institution TOKI was a major actor in this process, providing housing for low-income and mid-income families. Critical scholars have highlighted the debt traps that TOKI schemes involved for precarious populations, and the multiple ways in which their lives were curtailed by the TOKI ‘coffins’ (Eraydin and Taşan-Kok 2014; Karaman 2013). But this was not a universal rejection. Some residents were happy to buy into the TOKI schemes because it promised a ‘modern’ lifestyle beyond the rural stigma and inconveniences of squatter settlements (Civelek 2019: 8). Still others were able to profit from them financially (Eraydin and Taşan-Kok 2014: 121–22).

Nonetheless, the AKPs ‘cement economy,’ as critics called it, has been a major bone of contention in Turkish politics over the last years, as the Gezi protests (Kuymulu 2018) showed among others. The protests had erupted in opposition to urban renewal plans for a central park in Istanbul that would have involved cutting trees for an Ottoman-era-style building to house a shopping mall and luxury flats. The protests soon spread out across the country—in part because the government sanctioned a violent police response—as an

oppositional movement that denounced among others an increasingly authoritarian state and neoliberal urban politics. The government reaction to Gezi was one of the early cases that highlighted the process of alliance-formation via active polarization that the government would increasingly engage in (Bodirsky 2016), dividing the roughly 50 percent that supported the AKP in elections from the others that were soon defamed as terrorists and traitors. Even before the 2016 coup attempt, anti-terror discourse and related repression targeted not only socialists and Kurds but also Kemalist elites on the basis of a very broad legal definition of support for terror (Akça 2014: 38). This worked not only as a political strategy of repression, but also as a means of generating consent by activating complex histories of state devaluation and dispossession in political rhetoric and practice (Bodirsky 2021).

Election results were often taken as a proxy for consent to government politics. In fact, the constantly invoked ‘fifty percent’ of electoral support for the AKP was important not only for purposes of legitimacy, but especially also for the ongoing project of state remaking. It provided the parliamentary majority required to push through far-reaching constitutional changes. Elections—or majoritarianism—provide the means and a screen for hollowing out democratic institutions, as Öniş (2017: 12) notes for recent right-wing populisms more generally. Of course, one should not overstate this recent development, as the Turkish state has long had authoritarian dimensions (Bedirhanoğlu 2021; Yılmaz 2019), and the AKP’s project of state remaking was a long-standing one (Hoşgör 2015). Nonetheless, recent years have seen a ratcheting up of authoritarian statism, in particular with the state of emergency and the transition to a presidential system. To be dismantled was the Kemalist state and its elites. Early on, and with the support of the EU, the AKP government succeeded in reducing the institutional power of the military, which had in the past acted as a safeguard of the Kemalist order. Power struggles with Kemalist elites in the state were expressed in conflicts such as the so-called ‘postmodern coup’ of 2007 and the Ergenekon trials, which also opened up space in the state bureaucracy that could be filled by Gülenists (Akçay 2018; Akça 2014). While the AKP presented its constitutional reform of 2010 as a break with the undemocratic order of post-1980-coup Turkey, it soon became clear that it presented a stepping stone in the push for a presidential system that would dominate the agenda in the 2010s.

These political developments took place within shifting international alliances. While the EU had initially provided support for

(neo)liberalizing policies, it was seemingly no longer needed by the late 2000s. In the wake of the financial and Eurozone crisis, it was far from inspiring economic or political aspirations. Moreover, the EU wanted Turkey to retain refugees from Syria and thus muted its response to repressive politics. Alliances between illiberal states were forming in this period (Kalb 2018; Öniş 2017)—a new frontline space in the making. As Öniş and Kutlay (2020: 6) point out, countries such as Russia and China not only provided inspiration for a “top-down state capitalism,” but also held out the promise of alternative financing, reducing dependence on potential Western sources such as the IMF.

Thus, by the mid-2010s, a polarizing strategy of alliance-formation combined with a project of state remaking to complete the longer-standing process of ‘reversal’ had led to hardened fronts. At the same time, however, the alliance of the hegemonic project was fraying while the opposition was in a process of alliance-formation across former divisions. This was when dispossession came to the fore as a tool for shoring up the hegemonic project.

Dangers to the Alliance and the Use of Dispossession

Let us first have a look at the danger posed to the hegemonic project by alliance-formation in the opposition. In 2015, the pro-Kurdish HDP won more than 10 percent of the votes in the national elections—and thus passed the threshold that is widely considered to be in place to prevent Kurdish parties from entering parliament. Non-Kurdish Leftist voters were also among the supporters of the HDP at the time. The election result was greeted with much hope among some oppositional circles, because it promised “the possibility of breaching the entrenched barriers between the Turkish Socialist Left and the Kurdish autonomy movement” (Küçük and Özselçuk 2019: 5). For the governing AKP, this success constituted a major problem, because it undercut its absolute majority in Parliament, which was needed to push through the change to a presidential system with Erdoğan at its head.

The ‘solution’ to the problem was violence and dispossession, which served the dual purpose of forming an alliance with the far-right nationalist MHP²² and sharpening long-standing divisions among the opposition based on the ‘Kurdish issue.’ The government dragged out coalition negotiations during a flaring up of violent conflict in the Kurdish southeast. Many southeastern cities were under

curfew, and there were reports of tremendous violence against the civilian population. The nationalist politics of war mobilized histories of devaluation and dispossession of the Kurdish population and the long-standing discourse of anti-terror. In the new elections proclaimed when coalition formation failed (or, rather, was made to fail), the AKP indeed regained a parliamentary majority in its alliance with the MHP. With the suppression of *imzacı*, many of whom had lost their jobs and were subject to disciplinary proceedings and stigmatization (Baser, Akgönül, and Erdi Öztürk 2017; Tören and Kutun 2018), the politics of dispossession that was to be generalized during the state of emergency had one more precedent.

But the hegemonic project was not only under threat from the ‘outside.’ Already in the mid-2010s, the continuity of the economic performance on which ties with both capital and some subordinate populations had been built was in doubt. Economic growth slowed in the 2010s, current-account deficits widened, and there was a significant outflow of capital once the United States ended its policy of quantitative easing (Akçay 2018: 19; Akçay and Güngen 2019). The AKPs appeal had rested to a good extent on the sense of economic improvement that came with its rule. While in some of this, the government benefited from preceding factors such as macroeconomic reforms and increased foreign investment (Akçay and Güngen 2019; Arat and Pamuk 2019: 145), it largely rested on growth through debt-financed and state-managed construction (Balaban 2016; Çavuşoğlu and Strutz 2014), and on the wider availability of consumption credit as well as corporate loans in foreign currency (Akçay 2018; Akçay and Güngen 2019). This, however, contributed to increased indebtedness of companies and households alike. The Turkish lira had steadily lost value against the US dollar since 2013. Outflow of capital was a problem for an economy highly indebted in foreign currency, including the construction sector, thus placing a direct strain on the ‘economic nucleus’ of the regime.²³ Repeated terrorist attacks moreover injured the tourist sector and supporting industries. A deepening economic crisis was likely to strain ties in the alliance both in the form of popular support and in view of key factions of capital.

Last but not least, by the mid-2010s the AKP had lost a strategic ally in the state apparatus. By 2013, the alliance with the Gülen movement had already ruptured (Akçay 2018). Corruption accusations of key AKP figures—Erdoğan and his family included—were leaked to the public, presumably from ‘inner circles.’ The AKP reacted with a first round of purges in the police and military. The coup attempt,

which Erdoğan reportedly called a ‘gift from God,’ opened the path for more of this to come.

Dispossession as a Political Tool

Dispossession during the state of emergency served multiple purposes within the overall goal of shoring up the hegemonic project as one of enrichment. Most obviously, dispossession was a means of controlling the opposition, including former allies, through repression and intimidation. Dispossession by KHK during the state of emergency was both targeted and partly arbitrary, and both aspects are important to understand how it could serve political control. It was targeted, because it affected particular kinds of people disproportionately—those who were considered oppositional; and it was partly arbitrary, because it was unpredictable who among the potential targets would actually be dispossessed. Moreover, some of the dispossessed were not particularly active politically, and some even seemed allied with the government.

In this way, dispossession served as a strategy of control and intimidation not only vis-à-vis those who were political activists, but also to a lesser extent toward everyone else who opposed the politics of the AKP—roughly 50 percent of the population, if election results were an indicator. Initially not everyone was equally apprehensive when the state of emergency was declared. Some felt that it would be just ‘the Gülenists’²⁴ or the ‘terrorists’ who would be affected. But soon the glaring arbitrariness of dispossession contributed to a widespread mood of apprehension and waiting for the next turn. KHKs were published successively, without announcement; combined with the continuous renewal of the state of emergency, this produced a general sense of vulnerability. Many lived with the constant fear of being dispossessed, and prepared accordingly: some lived with cash in a suitcase under their bed in case their bank account was frozen, others sold their companies, or took precautions so that their family would not be dispossessed too. Many tried to develop a ‘plan B’ for leaving the country, while others knew that they had no legal way of going abroad, because they lacked the skills needed for a work permit.

Weighing heavily on people was not only the fear of being dispossessed of their livelihoods and social environments, but also the sense of political dispossession. For a while, there was a noticeable quieting of public protest. In NGO activism, fears of reprisal could lead to self-

ensorship. As one advocate for human rights put it, the result was a “more silent society” —even though some still showed tremendous courage in speaking out and staying politically active. While the politics of dispossession sometimes served to reinforce divisions among the opposition, it also contributed to the forging of new solidarities. Thus, it is unclear whether a politics of dispossession can actually succeed as a means of control in the mid-to-long run.

Beyond targeting the opposition, dispossession likely strengthened the ties with both dominant and subordinate social forces in the alliance. First off, it engendered resources for the state that could be used to buffer the ‘economic nucleus’ of the regime. The value that passed hands here as a consequence of the closure of institutions and confiscation of private companies is likely tremendous, even though we cannot be fully sure about its extent. This is a political case of “accumulation by dispossession,” where funds first flow to the state, and only second, and obscurely, to the private economy.²⁵ While dispossession in this case clearly led to the appropriation of capital, it generated resources for the state that could then be redistributed strategically and thus, at most, only indirectly served accumulation. Appropriated funds likely served distribution along established lines within the alliance, as there are strong reports of close links between the government and *yandaş sermaye* (partisan capital), which is being “consistently favored in public-sector projects” (Arat and Pamuk 2019: 148), as well as of the importance of public services and handouts for maintaining the support of poorer sections of the population.

However, the generation of funds for distribution and, possibly, accumulation was likely not the primary rationale but rather a welcome side effect of the politics of dispossession within a larger project of enrichment. Possibly more important for the shoring up of the alliance and further recalibrating the scales of social worth was the resonance of a polarizing and nationalist discourse of anti-terror that was promoted through the politics of dispossession, in the context of a long history of devaluation, dispossession, and violence in Turkey. People could be mobilized around the protection of the nation, and long-standing injuries and resentments were played upon for that. The coercive means of dispossession thus became a means to generate consent.

Dispossession also furthered the hegemonic project’s long-standing attempt at remaking the state in both its narrow and its general sense. Dismissal by KHK allowed for the exchange of state personnel, likely putting in place people who were supporting the regime. Moreover, the state of emergency enabled changes in the legal

framework of the state, as many KHKs were rendered permanent by later parliamentary approval. According to Akça et al. (2018: 7), more than a thousand amendments were made to national legislation in this way, most of which were “in no way related to the reasons prompting the declaration of the State of Emergency [and] introduced changes in order to restructure state–society relations in such diverse areas as national defense, internal security, state personnel regime, economy and social security, administrative structure, education and health.” The pinnacle of this process of state remaking was the introduction of a presidential system, which was voted on during the state of emergency in a referendum overshadowed by accusations of fraud and the repression of the opposition. The new system allows for governance by presidential decree, and is widely criticized for ending separation of powers (Jongerden 2018: 6–7; Küçük and Özselçuk 2019: 14–15).

These are all far-reaching changes of the state in the narrow sense. But the state in the general sense was also targeted concretely through dispossession. The closure of media, universities, and other institutions dispossessed parts of the population from established means of social and cultural support and expression. It was clearly meant to streamline civil society, to control the kinds of information and knowledge produced and disseminated (Abbas and Zalta 2017; Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017), and to deepen the project of ‘reversal’ in the nooks and crannies of society.

The remaking of the state was to institutionally entrench the authoritarian populist hegemonic project that enriched new elites. This was not without contradictions. Reports suggested that the state bureaucracy was stretched dangerously thin as a consequence of the dismissals. Also, not all AKP supporters were comfortable with the far-reaching changes of the presidential system—for example, because they did not want any successor of Erdoğan to have so much power. Nonetheless, the referendum was narrowly successful, and it created a state that later hegemonic projects will be at pains to transform.

Contradictory Effects

Dispossession ended up constituting not only a means of shoring up the hegemonic alliance but a potential threat to it as well. For one, the experience of dispossession was in fact not limited to the opposition: political and economic instability, depreciation of the

lira, and tremendously increased inflation de facto dispossessed much of the population. The politics of dispossession during the state of emergency likely contributed to this development, even if it was not its main cause. The economic situation deteriorated rapidly in the period after the coup attempt. Economic growth slowed further. Capital outflow reached tremendous proportions (Akçay and Güngen 2019: 15; Arat and Pamuk 2019: 149). And while the lira had steadily depreciated against the dollar and euro in preceding years, it went into free fall repeatedly during and after the state of emergency. In particular since 2018, increased inflation has put a considerable strain on household consumption. Issues such as the rising price of onions, a staple food necessary for nearly all Turkish dishes, scandalized the public.

The importance of this is not to be underestimated, as is shown by the political responses to this crisis. Already in the fall and winter of 2016, the government mobilized a national response to currency depreciation: the people were called upon to exchange foreign currency savings into Turkish lira. Holding back on foreign currency reserves was in turn framed as an act of treason. Government-affine media followed suit. Somewhat amusingly, such media kept entirely silent on the free fall of the Turkish lira against the US dollar in summer of 2018 (even though it reported on what President Erdoğan called the “economic war” with the United States), only to eventually run the headline that the “US dollar tumbles more than 5 percent against the Turkish lira.”²⁶

The stylized fight against inflation involved similar tropes of national struggle. Supermarkets put up signs next to price tags that read *Enflasyonla topyekün mücadele*, *#Türkiye kazanacak* (All-out struggle against inflation, #Turkey will win). The government blamed dispossession on outside forces, and presented itself as taking care of the nation. Leading up to the municipal elections of spring 2019, the local AKP government distributed vegetables at low prices in tents set up for this purpose in central places, called *halk sebze* (vegetables for the people).²⁷ Shortly after the elections, the tent in one central square that I had often passed was gone (though inflation was not). Asking a friend about it, she told me that the tent had vanished the day after elections.

The frantic attempts of the government to mobilize national sentiment against currency depreciation and inflation, and to blame the dispossession of households on foreign forces, clearly showed how important this was for maintaining ties with subordinate populations. At the same time, the ongoing economic crisis placed strains

on the ‘economic nucleus’ of the hegemonic project: companies were struggling with a debt burden tremendously increased through the appreciation of the dollar. The government sought to buffer this effect through a two-pronged strategy. First, measures such as debt restructuring or state credits were to redress the problem of increased corporate debt (Akçay 2018; Akçay and Güngen 2019: 13, 17; Öniş and Kutlay 2020: 23). Second, President Erdoğan insisted on keeping interest rates low, with the heterodox argument that this would reduce inflation, putting pressure on the Central Bank—against the demands of international capital (Demiralp and Demiralp 2019; Öniş and Kutlay 2020: 17). This was in fact an attempt to maintain economic growth and demand for the key allied sector of construction and real estate, but it led to further depreciation of the lira and capital outflow (Akçay 2018: 24; Öniş 2019: 9; Öniş and Kutlay 2020).

For international investors, the sense of economic and political instability was compounded by actions of Erdoğan such as making his son-in-law the minister of treasury and finance, appointing himself as head of the new Sovereign Wealth Fund, repeatedly replacing the head of the Central Bank by presidential decree, and fueling political conflict with the United States. Here, the politics of dispossession in Turkey likely added to a suspicion of the state, straining ties with international finance.

The politics of dispossession also may have contributed to an internal split of the political forces in the hegemonic alliance. The former key AKP figures Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu founded their own political parties, and mounted criticism of the centralization of power. Whether their split was due to a real discomfort with an increased authoritarianism or to other power games, the choice to play publicly along those lines suggests that a perceived growing discomfort in Turkish society with the politics of dispossession could be politically mobilized.

Lastly, while the government has succeeded in narrowing the political space, it has not immobilized oppositional social forces. The politics of dispossession, even as it divides, also opens up new relations of solidarity (Carbonella and Kasmir 2015) and concerted efforts at ‘repossession’ (Salemink and Rasmussen 2016). This is also the case for Turkey, where oppositional parties as well as wider social movements developed new alliances. The municipal election success in 2019 of the oppositional CHP in urban centers such as Istanbul and Ankara was a beacon of hope for many. In recent months, students have protested against the government imposition of an AKP-affine rector at Bosphorus University, despite repressions. Those outside

the alliance have not ceded hopes of repossessing their futures, and they may in fact be increasing in number.

Residues of the Past, Perspectives on the Future

The politics of dispossession plays a prominent role in authoritarian populist hegemonic projects: activating past injuries for a strategic measure of consent to a project of 'reversal,' making and breaking alliances, pushing along a project of state remaking. The particular social values promoted by a hegemonic project are important for constituting alliances, and in terms of their political effects. However, the key issue driving authoritarian populism seems to be the securing of control of particular politico-economic elites over the accumulation and distribution of value(s). The project of reversal here entails changes in relations of power and domination between different social forces.

To emphasize the role that dispossession plays in frontline spaces of authoritarian populism is not to say that liberal hegemonic projects do not work through dispossession. Plenty of studies on the exclusions of liberalism and on the repressive side of neoliberalism have shown otherwise. While dispossession here is often less starkly visible, frequently taking place through market mechanisms and being flanked by formal rights and liberties, its effects have played an important role in the success of the illiberal Right today and their authoritarian populist hegemonic projects. In turn, the latter's intensified state-led politics of dispossession leaves its own marks and injuries, as well as new enrichments that are likely to shape politics for years to come. While it entails contradictions and therefore does not work unequivocally for the continuity of a hegemonic project, the latter is far from approaching an automatic end. The unraveling of existing hegemonic projects requires both the fracturing of the existing alliances underpinning them, as well as effective counter projects.

As Gavin Smith (2004: 100) has remarked, "hegemonic formations need to be secured for the future and yet carry with them residues of past hegemonic work." In this light, in Turkey and elsewhere, the securing of authoritarian populist hegemonic projects through dispossession creates residues in the present that opposed hegemonic projects will have to contend with in the future. Those residues concern, of course, the state structures that the project of state remaking has put in place; but it also concerns landscapes of differential and unequal distribution of value and values, and the frontlines these

help to shape. If the processes of active polarization that authoritarian populisms promote in their strategies of alliance-formation are to be transformed by a new hegemonic project, the latter will have to actively intervene in the past and ongoing politics of (de)valuation and dispossession, enrichment, and accumulation.

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Notes

1. FETÖ is short for *Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, a term that became popularized only after the coup attempt, and it refers to the Islamic movement led by the imam Fethullah Gülen.
2. The term Kemalism refers to the political vision that is attributed to the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which involved among others the principle of secularism. The term Kemalist is used for those who identify with this legacy, currently often in explicit opposition to a more religious-conservative vision of the state and society.
3. There is an important experiential dimension to dispossession: if I individually do not value something that however is of value to others, I cannot be dispossessed of it, even if I end up not having it. This experiential dimension of dispossession—the

experience of being deprived of something that one values—is, for example, important for understanding the “politics of affect” (Bangstad, Enge Bertelsen, and Henkel 2019) of contemporary populisms.

4. I use the term ‘dispossession’ for these manifold experiences of oppression because they come together for many in this historical moment as one unitary (even though multistranded) experience of being deprived of the kinds of value(s) that make life worth living.
5. Wolf began *Europe and the People Without History* with the following statement: “The central assertion of this book is that the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes, and inquiries that disassemble this totality into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality. Concepts like ‘nation,’ ‘society,’ and ‘culture’ name bits and threaten to turn names into things. Only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships, and by placing them back into the field from which they were abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inferences and increase our share of understanding” (Wolf 1982: 1). My thanks to Don Kalb for reminding me of this connection.
6. This binary is of course somewhat overdrawn, as market dispossession is generally also state-enabled.
7. KHK is short for *Kanun Hükmünde Kararname*, a “decree having the force of law” or an executive order.
8. Numbers are taken from the IHOP report (2018) and updated with the numbers from the remaining KHKs during the state of emergency.
9. These were, among others, human, women’s, or children’s rights organizations or associations working towards poverty alleviation or the protection of cultural heritage.
10. Many of the foundations were active in the areas of culture and education.
11. Numbers taken from the IHOP report, and updated with the numbers from the remaining KHKs during the state of emergency. Dismissals were not the only form of dispossession. The work permits of over twenty-two thousand teachers were cancelled. About three hundred graduate students studying abroad on state scholarships lost their scholarships as well as the right to accreditation of academic titles in Turkey. Workers who lost their employment in the private sector because of being accused of having links to terror organizations were barred from employment by companies where the state had any shares, and from jobs in the public sector (KHK 673).
12. As lawyer Kerem Altıparmak (2017: 13) points out—among other concerns about the legal setup, independence, and workings of the commission—if the commission was to review the expected one hundred thousand applications within a period of two years, each member of the commission would be “required to be a rapporteur for 35 files per day as well as to debate and sign at least 100 decisions.”
13. The most expensive sales at the time of writing (October 2020) are the sale of a factory areal (*Ufuk Boru Osmaniye Tesisi*) at 89 million lira, and of another (*Naksan Plastik Ticari ve İktisadi Bütünlüğü*) at 1 billion 126 million lira.
14. The TMSF website lists companies under trusteeship as well as ongoing sales; it also publishes regular reports, but these are very brief and lack transparency. There is no record of conducted sales or obtained revenues in areas other than the media. As regards the latter, a total value of 44 million lira seems to have been obtained through sales so far.
15. This had a precedent in the public branding of the *imzacı* before the coup attempt, when nationalist newspapers published names and often even photographs of academics who had signed the petition, the latter often finding red crosses on their office doors, and being subjected to other forms of harassment.
16. To be exact, lawful strike could be suspended for sixty days by council of ministers.
17. The AKP first won the national elections shortly after its foundation within a legacy

- of Islamist and conservative political parties. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had been mayor of Istanbul since 1994, was its key political figure from its inception. Describing itself as conservative-democrat, its initial support included liberal sections of the population who hoped, among other things, for a liberalization of a repressive secularism. Erdoğan served as prime minister in the years 2002–14. While he had already been president since 2014, his official powers were significantly increased with the 2019 adoption of a presidential system that was pushed through in the wake of the coup attempt.
18. Kemalism (see Note 2) can be understood as the ideology of a previous hegemonic project remaking the state that was central to the Turkish republic. The Kemalist state thus refers to both key principles of statehood, such as secularism, and to the ideological outlook and political alliances of many state personnel.
 19. See, e.g., Oxford Business Group, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/turkey-construction-sector-maintain-its-significant-role-economy-several-large-projects-under-way>, last accessed 30 June 2021.
 20. It also supported the “construction of consent” by ideological means: as the Media Ownership Monitor Turkey (MOM) shows, the construction and media sectors are fundamentally intertwined and tied to state elites: <http://turkey.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/business-interests/>, last accessed 30 April 2021.
 21. Figures by market research organization Mordor Intelligence: <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/turkey-construction-market>, last accessed 29 June 2021.
 22. The MHP is a political party that takes a hard-line stance against the Kurdish political movement.
 23. Various market research agencies see a contraction in the construction sector during the time of currency volatility because of the increase in construction and borrowing costs. See, e.g., Mordor Intelligence: <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/turkey-construction-market>, last accessed 29 June 2021.
 24. Many in the opposition had been highly critical of the Gülen movement, its alliance with the government, and the takeover of state positions in previous years. From this vantage point, the dispossession of Gülenists was often not considered problematic.
 25. While David Harvey (2003) has pointed to the role that “accumulation by dispossession” has always played in capitalism, and more so in neoliberal capitalism, the term “political accumulation” used by Gledhill might be more akin to what is going in authoritarian populism. Gledhill (1999: 212) refers with this notion to a “political class’s ability to exploit the tributary mechanisms of the state apparatus for private purposes.” If we include the maintaining of political power into the definition of a private purpose—enrichment through political control—we are close to what one could recently observe in countries like Turkey.
 26. Article in the English language *Daily Sabah* from 14 August 2018: <https://www.daily-sabah.com/finance/2018/08/14/us-dollar-tumbles-more-than-5-percent-against-the-turkish-lira>, last accessed on 14 August, 2018.
 27. The term *halk sebze* references the established institution of *halk ekmeği* (bread for the people): bread sold at low prices by municipalities.

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“SCRAPS FROM THE BOURGEOIS KITCHEN”

On the Romanian Frontline of Outsourced Creativity

Oana Mateescu and Don Kalb



Introduction

In March 2021, the ‘Rubik’ platform was launched in the city of Cluj-Napoca (Cluj, from now on). Rubik was raising the alarm about a fast-moving gentrification and an aggressive real estate market that was increasingly ‘suffocating’ cultural and artistic spaces and practices. Rubik is a platform of the now dematerialized Paintbrush Factory, a locally and internationally famous collective of visual and performing artists operating since 2009 on the premises of a former paintbrush factory, located in the industrial area along the river, a few kilometers east from the medieval center of this Transylvanian city (Braniște 2019; Mironica 2019). The Paintbrush Factory was pushed out in 2019 by offices and classrooms for an ‘informal’ information technology (IT) school. It was also abandoned by City Hall. Cluj politics has been dominated for more than a decade by mayor Boc and his liberal alliance, set up for turning Cluj into the penultimate Romanian instantiation of a ‘creative city.’ Boc was the mayor of the educated ‘creative class’ à la Richard Florida, cognitive workers who would not only drive up productivity after the postsocialist collapse, but also anchor a liberal cosmopolitan city while participating in the making of a brave new global world of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

After the 2008 financial crisis, the former industrial landmarks of the city have been increasingly reclaimed for business centers, IT



Figure 7.1. Cluj IT offshore offices. © Oana Mateescu and Don Kalb

offices, technology parks and co-working spaces. Socialist furniture and textile factories were repurposed for the postindustrial service economy, which in this semi-peripheral area of the capitalist world economy could not but emerge as an offshoot of a global wave of Western outsourcing in ‘business process’ and information technology services. This is a city that had been teetering on the brink of economic collapse for more than a postsocialist decade under nationalist mayor Funar, who steadily decried the evils of foreign capital and kept fueling interethnic tension between Romanians and Hungarians (Petrovici 2011). From the time of the financial crisis, and accelerating after 2014, the city’s attractiveness as an IT outsourcing hotspot in Eastern Europe let loose an entire panoply of bottled-up neoliberal aspirations, while offering, for the first time, a viable local alternative to the prospect of mass outmigration. Cluj became the most successful Romanian example of a process that in the 2010s was transforming cities, economies, labor, and ideology all over Central and Eastern Europe, in an uneven repeat of what had been happening earlier in India, Mexico, and the Philippines, but now on postsocialist territory.

The ‘nowhere office,’ brought into fashion by the 2020 global pandemic, had already been colonizing urban space in and around Cluj. As an invocation of the mobility of contemporary “footloose

labor" (Huws 2014), this notion gestures to the multitude of spaces that labor can take over or even create. Echoing the jargon of Cluj creatives, one can speak of laboratories—pockets of urban space dedicated to experiment, collaborative discovery, and creativity, but in the (etymological) end also places defined by their capacity to produce and shelter particular types of labor. Much of our fieldwork consisted in doing the rounds of IT offices, coffee shops, co-works, maker spaces, incubators, accelerators, IT schools and coding academies; as well as time-bound events (real or virtual) curated via websites and apps: meet-ups, workshops, start-up pitches, IT conferences, innovation labs, tech fests, job fairs, and a cornucopia of corporate and civic 'hackathons' and even 'blockathons' (harnessing blockchain for public sector challenges) that were on offer.¹ With the professionalization of the hipster into the 'upster' (involved in 'start-ups'), labor here has come to appear as a form of social and urban belonging framed in the terms of a liberal techno-moral governance that can seemingly refashion the entire city into a laboratory, and whole working lives into a space of perpetual adventure. Labor and politics can both be 'hacked' via digital fixes: apps for mobility, citizen complaints, cultural consumption, and even an online platform for urban participatory budgeting—the original Porto Alegre idea associated with the democratic desires of the alterglobalist movement of the early 2000s, turned into an app and a click. This urban laboratory embodies the kind of "entrepreneurial citizenship" that Irani (2019: 22) saw emerging in India as a way "to subsume hope and dissatisfaction, redirecting potential political contestation into economic productivity and experiment."

However, underneath the experimental buzz and the futurist rhetoric of mayor Boc, one is inevitably confronted with the deep, unsteady beat of a huge outsourcing complex, a 'service plantation' in the apt characterization of some critical insiders, which now occupies anywhere between 20 and 30 percent of the local labor market (upwards of 20,000 workers in a city of some 400,000, including 80,000 students). This complex is driven by the pressure on Western capital to reduce the costs of its office workers in the West. Labor is offered for some 30 percent of the Western price, and is only slightly more expensive than the Indians and Filipinos with whom they knowingly compete (discounting the top players, who command incomes near the Western average for IT specialists). But if one digs deeper one begins to see how the local ensemble is equally shaped by the needs, 'aspirations,' and capacities of local 'living' labor. Transnational Romanian tech-talent from the diaspora in places like

France, Toronto, and Silicon Valley also play a marked role, as do the specific balances and ideological biases of Romanian politics. Below the surface, one finds an accumulation machine that steadily draws in and spews out extensive renewable pools of young, exploitable, cognitive workers who are drawn towards the shining liberal city in the valley by the promises of its educational institutions, all seeking to escape the steep decline of the villages and small towns in the postsocialist provinces. From the moment of their arrival, the young adults lack the means to sustain themselves in the rapidly gentrifying city, and soon enough begin selling their spare labor time (often in the night) to the corporations while trying to finish their studies, which many, understandably, fail to do in the end. One knowledgeable insider told us frankly: “This is the IT business model: we take fresh people and turn them into saleable commodities.”

Theories of ‘creative classes’ and their associated trickle-down urbanism à la Richard Florida (2002), but also Marxist evocations of ‘cognitive labor,’ ‘immaterial labor,’ and the supposedly democratic and egalitarian ‘urban multitudes’ and urban commons that are associated with it (Lazzarato 1996; Negri and Hardt 2004), are dominated by the teleological timelines of postmodern reiterations of modernization theory, as well as by the ongoing transformation of Western metropolises. But they are conspicuously silent on the uneven and contradictory realities of capitalist social space. This has serious repercussions for their reliability and relevance within Western cities, but in the context of the capitalist production of non-Western and non-core spaces it all but destroys their credentials. Cluj, as we found it, was produced by a determinate and knowable ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey 1981): a dynamic point in an identifiable value chain; a receptor of particular flows of capital, overwhelmingly seeking cheap ‘no collar’ service labor in ‘plantation-like’ regimes of production; a point where specific global and local histories—capitalist, socialist, and postsocialist—were dialectically coming together; a fix that feeds on and nurtures peculiar valences of labor and life.

There was even, as several of our interlocutors suggested, a special ‘cultural fix.’ He meant the buzzing ‘work ethos’ of the city. The culture-word often appeared when local actors were trying to explain to us the nature of the city, both with positive and with negative connotations. Cluj was more ‘Western’ in culture than the rest of Romania, because it had been ruled historically by the Habsburgs, not by the Ottoman Turks, which obviously explained its creative success and its work ethic. Cluj was also ‘multicultural’ and therefore ‘open’ as compared to a supposedly monocultural Romania or Eastern Europe,

inhabited as it is by both Hungarian speakers and Romanian speakers. One of our more senior interlocutors bluntly but perceptively claimed that "outsourcing is what you get if your leadership destroys both agriculture and industry." But even he sought recourse to culture in order to explain why Cluj should then have become a region-wide champion in the race for IT outsourcing: the Habsburg mental heritage did it. But culture was also called upon to explain blockages: there was "an outsourcing mind-set that did not allow the emergence of a 'product mind-set,'" a mental transition that various top players deemed necessary in order for Cluj to climb up in the chain of value.

Working through the frontlines of value dialectically embedded in this peculiar 'spatial fix,' this chapter explores some of the ways in which outsourcing produces, shelters, divides, and exploits, but also simultaneously animates and inspires digital labor in the postsocialist space. In his classic account of 'de-classed' white-collar workers in Weimar Germany, Siegfried Kracauer (1998) described the grand cafes, cinema palaces and dance halls of Berlin in the early thirties as "shelters for the homeless," where the new salaried masses could forget the fraught contradiction between their middle-class desires and their increasingly proletarian reality. Kracauer would have wished them to run for the shelter of Marxism rather than accept "scraps from the bourgeois kitchen that now end up down below at a reduced price" (ibid.: 103). This chapter picks up such threads of contradiction as they unfold across global and local chains of value, embedded in entangled local and global histories, and moving the spotlight from boomtown to revanchist city, to dropouts and 'bubbles of pampering,' and finally to conflicted intimate zones where even the leftovers, Kracauer's "scraps," cannot but smack of the political.

Creatively Outsourcing Social Contradictions

I don't know what I would have done after graduation, if not for the IT corporations. Probably picking strawberries in Spain. . . . IT is the only area in Romania where you can make a living.

—IT service worker, female, BA Applied Modern Languages,
MA Translation Studies

Many outsourcing companies treat developers like cattle. You get in line, you get a number assigned to you and then you just churn out code.

—Manager, IT company

Traditional outsourcing is dead. Long live disruptive outsourcing.

—Deloitte 2018

The Covid-19 lockdowns put a spotlight on the essential, yet vulnerable, workers who could not afford the privilege of working from home, exposing deep divisions among and within labor that had previously been obscured in the global routines of capitalism *comme il faut*. In Cluj, at the height of the lockdown (April 2020), when movement within the country and across the European Union was reduced to a mere trickle, the city's tiny international airport was literally flooded by around two thousand people in one day. These were seasonal agricultural workers streaming in from villages all over northwestern Romania to embark on charter flights to Germany, where entire fields of vegetables were beginning to rot in the absence of cheap and exploitable migrant labor from Eastern Europe. There was panicky talk in Brussels about the potential failure of the European harvest 2020. "The asparagus imperative" (Rogozanu and Gabor 2020) instantly trumped the tightly maintained pandemic strictures on movement and social intercourse, graphically exposing the astounding unevenness and inequalities that lie at the core of the EU economy. The photographs of migrant workers packed into the airport also made visible once more to the citizens of Cluj the presence of 'the other Romania,' of provincial abandonment and poverty. While many in Cluj imagined this as a reminder of the ongoing coexistence of two separate cultural worlds in the same country, some understood that the Cluj bubble itself was predicated on precisely this spatial unevenness: fed and maintained by renewable inflows of human energy extracted from the imploding postsocialist provinces—namely, their aspirational youth, seeking escape and a future to believe in.

The images of the crowded Cluj airport, and the dark jokes about white asparagus (Pop 2020), could hardly vie with the omnipresent hashtags of pandemic order and responsibility: #stayathome (#staiacasă). Working from home turned out to be nothing less than a boon for the local IT sector: the transition to remote work was "smooth," leading initially to increased productivity and efficiency, and greater flexibility, as well as cost and risk cuts—new hires were postponed and companies resorted to subcontracting to freelancers, now even into the countryside (Bunduchi and Crișan 2021). Moreover, the pandemic push toward the digitalization of various processes led to growing demand for IT services, so much so that a report on IT outsourcing in Eastern and Central Europe could state blankly that Covid-19 was "a real opportunity" (Emerging Europe 2021: 16).

Ten years after joining the EU in 2007, Romania was found to have experienced among the highest emigration rates in the EU, with 20.6

percent of its working population having moved abroad (largely to other EU countries).² The workers crowding Cluj airport on their way to the EU agricultural fields, slaughterhouses, and nursing homes were only the latest surge in an exodus that had profoundly changed the national labor landscape as well as its domestic politics. As one of our interlocutors from Cluj put it, Romania has been busy "exporting its social contradictions."³

This is a region-wide experience. Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and the Baltics have joined the upper league of global labor outmigration together, next to countries like India, Mexico, and the Philippines. Significantly, all these giga-expulsion locations have become leading IT and 'business process' outsourcing destinations for Western capital. The Romanian experience, thus, stands for a recurrent global phenomenon. In open, liberalized emergent economies there is a close social and territorial relation between, on the one hand, large-scale foreign emigration from the provinces, and on the other, booming cities driven by outsourced Western capital exploiting educated, 'smart,' and lucky local youth. In all such places we should expect the presence of a popular sense of bifurcation of the country into two apparently sealed and opposed cultural worlds, a bifurcation that is likely to get aggregated and expressed in a sharply polarized national politics of an often identity-driven kind. In Romania this polarization articulates as productive versus unproductive populations, and as anti-corrupt versus corrupt politics, the two images perfectly overlapping. As one result of such politics, IT labor in Romania has acquired a waiver from income tax, allowing 'productivity to thrive' and produce its assumed 'trickle down' and 'spin-offs.'⁴ There is also a low flat tax as an incentive for foreign capital in general. And finally, to fuel 'start-up' development and satisfy the myths of disruption and innovation, corporations are allowed to hire IT labor as 'independent entrepreneurs.' The Cluj IT sector is in many ways an 'enclave economy,' the boundaries of which are maintained by a combined politics of class and identity: disruptive, productive, anti-corrupt, self-propelled by the purity of talent and effort.

After fifteen years of IT boom, Cluj, thus, stands as a stark urban exception in a landscape of abandonment: an oasis of employment, a "middle-class bubble,"⁵ a "magnet city" for internal migration, the quintessential university town, a hotspot for the creative and knowledge economy, the only East European city to be shortlisted by the EU for "the capital of innovation award" in 2020. As a city council brochure proclaims (and *The Economist* confirms), "Cluj is the most attractive city in Romania." This attractiveness is about

economic growth, employment, cultural vitality, civic engagement, public dynamism, and all-around friendliness. The city government is rhetorically committed to generating an urban environment that is appropriate to the “high value” creative classes it seeks to accommodate. Still under the spell of Richard Florida (2002), and oblivious to his legion of critics (such as Lovink and Rossiter 2007; Mould 2018; and Peck 2020) or his own recent turnaround (Florida 2017), Cluj, in the words of its mayor, strives to encourage “technology, tolerance, and talent” with a view to fostering growth and innovation. His chosen urban interlocutors are Silicon Valley and Boston.⁶ The emphasis on innovation, technical as well as social, perseveres despite the overwhelming factual dependence of the local economy on outsourcing from the West, a dependence that inevitably poses limits: with very few exceptions, actual product development in IT is mere aspiration.⁷

Cluj, as its more sober observers easily acknowledge, continues to specialize on arbitration on labor costs. Western outsourcing firms bill the labor of local IT developers for 5,000 USD to their Western clients (clients who often do not know that the actual work is being done in Romania). The local developer is paid around 2,000 USD, which leaves a lot for the necessary support labor that can be paid decidedly less, all the way down to 500 USD for service night work. This is how various local insiders summarized the Cluj equation for us in 2018 (while 2023 numbers are adjusted upwards for inflation, the logic is similar). Cluj sells cheap labor hours, a mere “numbers game,” as the critics repeat, “monkey business.” If local capital could claim property rights to a well-selling product, they would be able to sell the same quantity of expended labor over and over again, like Silicon Valley and Boston. As long as the opposite is the case, Cluj has no choice but to labor over and over again for any next unit of output sold.

Major efforts are now being made in Cluj toward designing, marketing, and selling that desired product. Some do so for the under-resourced but growing Romanian market, including the emerging market of Romanian ‘smart cities’ in which Cluj plays a leading role. They thus escape the harshest pressures of outsourcing and labor arbitrage that rule over the majority of firms. One famous enterprise, UiPath, the second Romanian ‘unicorn,’ now registered in New York, sells crucial business software to half the Fortune 500 list of multinationals. Significantly, the firm grew from within the multiple connections between the IT world of Cluj and its American Romanian diaspora. It maintains a relatively small development unit of some

eighty engineers in Cluj (as of 2019), and is seeking to double that if local Romanian skills allow, which the director thinks is still open to question.⁸ But elsewhere in the business, "a lack of product mindset," as the critics say, make it hard to actually develop that product that can be sold over and over. Others argue that a lack of deep research is to blame. But these obvious absences are all the predictable results of its specific spatial fix: Cluj is where the cheap labor is, not where the rich final market is, or where globally protected property titles are held. Access to and knowledge of that final market and its fast-moving demands is the usual prerogative of their Western headquarters, intermediaries, and clients. No outsourcing location has found an easy path out of the global unevenness and hierarchies of value from which it arose.

This IT fueled fantasy of 'creative-driven' and future-oriented urban development persists, despite two further major contradictions. First, the fast-rising housing and living costs that put Cluj ahead of Bucharest and make it one of the most expensive cities for living in Southeastern Europe, fomenting not only deep urban inequalities but also serving to transfer a substantial chunk of any broad-based local wage growth for its workers inevitably toward its landlords. Indeed, there is a noted tendency for local entrepreneurs in IT who are not part of global conglomerates to switch their capital after their first or second round of accumulation from labor arbitrage and the cumbersome management of productivity within highly competitive global value chains to the more comfortable rent taking from local real estate. The research undertaken by housing activists (such as *Social Houses Now*) draws attention to the exorbitant costs of housing in the city: in 2020 at 1,800 euros per square meter (rising to 2,228 euros in 2023), it forces many students and employees to live in overcrowded and overvalued conditions, to work multiple jobs in order to cover basic rent and living costs, or to submit to hellish commutes from the metropolitan area—two hours in the rush hour for 30 kilometers up and down is not rare (Troc 2019; Vincze et al. 2020). Meanwhile, investment in public and social housing—a sector drastically reduced since the mass housing privatizations of the early postsocialist era—has been entirely cut since 2015. The 'creative city,' the mayor argues, does not need it. Activists suspect him of being in cahoots with real estate capital, and forced evictions have now become the norm. Cluj is the Romanian city with the largest concentrated Roma population, quartered in the infamous ghetto of Pata-Rât on a waste-site near the airport, just outside the city (Vincze et al. 2018).

Secondly, there is the very real uncertainty of an outsourcing bubble that could implode any time, with transnational capital flying off without notice. This happened with Nokia around 2010. The Finnish transnational had started a major investment for a smart phone factory in Cluj just before the financial crisis struck. A few thousand ‘high value’ jobs were announced, and they were already hiring. But Nokia was forced to write off the whole investment in order to save its Helsinki capital base (Zinca 2011; Mihaly 2015). Moreover, major Western outsourcers in Cluj, like UK-based Endava, are steadily opening up cheaper and more competitive locations in countries further East, such as Ukraine, Macedonia, and Albania, but also Morocco, Mexico, and Venezuela. And then there is India lurking in the background with more than 3 million workers in its IT sector in Bangalore and Hyderabad, where labor is still 20 percent cheaper than in Cluj. ‘Near shoring’ circles say that technically the Indian outsourcers are less good than the Romanians, and ‘culturally’ they are less proximate to the West, which is said to put strain on the continuous long-distance communication that is going on with clients. But what is the ultimate exchange value of those differences? We constantly heard that wage rises in Cluj are on an unsustainable upward curve. If claims toward greater prosperity continue, it is publicly said, the goose with the golden eggs will be killed. Insiders are warning that that moment is fast approaching, even though measured in a human lifetime it has only just started.

Enabled by information and communication technologies, the outsourcing waves of the 2010s thus found the nearshore of Cluj an irresistible location: a cheap young aspirational workforce, many with good basic technical training grounded in a local history of socialist computing, excellent English skills, and in a geopolitical and cultural comfort zone within the EU. The basics of IT outsourcing in Cluj continue to reflect this focus on labor arbitrage and low-value activities: the industry is still often described as a “service factory” with little autonomy or control over the tasks received on “the new assembly line.” Just as in India, the paradox of IT outsourcing is that it stimulates a popular imaginary of technical and social innovation while training and employing a workforce trapped between the calculation of billable hours and fast delivery times (Aneesh 2006; Upadhy 2016). A local outsourcing survey (Andras 2017) sought to separate Eastern Europe from South Asia, and emphasizes cheap labor there versus creative labor here, while pointing to the higher added value and forward-looking practices now being developed in Cluj IT and

business process outsourcing (BPO). In the best local enterprises, something of this promise seems to be actually happening. But perhaps as a consequence, we also learnt about growing numbers of cases of well-groomed local specialist employees being transferred into the Western parts of corporations. Fix investment in the local economy from German multinationals such as Bosch and Siemens is also growing, as is product development. There is some hope beyond the outsourcing bubble. But no one has the illusion that it could be working for all: there are always dropouts and leftovers.

Dropout Syndrome

People in my team have BAs. They usually started working during their studies and thus missed many courses. Even if they have degrees, they had interrupted ones: they can be assimilated to dropouts in that sense. . . . I consider my colleagues here as functional dropouts because they cannot read and compute.

—Female team coordinator, PhD Sociology

There are only so many people who have an IT university degree; we see them in internships, and we take those who fit our company. Many more do not have university degrees. If we really want to grow, fast and big, then we need to look at people with no software studies.

—Female HR specialist, PhD Philosophy

Since 2010, the number of IT employees in Cluj has almost quadrupled, reaching over twenty thousand in 2020 (Petrovici and Mare 2020).⁹ Computing science departments in the various local universities are eager to adapt to corporate needs, while their students are keen to plunge into the IT labor market long before graduation, even in their first year. Students in the social sciences and humanities are not left behind, as they too flock to any opportunities to get involved in the lower tiers of the IT labor market, which hardly require specialist skills, and in fact predominate. Such entry-level jobs outside the core of IT developers do transmit the promise of a potential career in the proliferating HR, service, analyst, and project management jobs within the sector. Workers are being offered training and in-house courses, as well as impressive day-to-day support from their personal coaches, managers, and direct colleagues. Anything they do not yet know, they quickly learn to find it on the web. IT companies compete in offering attractive benefit packages to their turnover-prone employees: high salaries relative to the Romanian

average, private health insurance, gym, pool or sauna subscriptions and countless opportunities for further learning (in hard and soft skills but also in “life skills” such as yoga, meditation, etiquette, wine tasting, etc.). Even low-tier jobs in service, support, and nontechnical areas are attractive: slaving away on the night shift at a service desk on a full-time salary of 500 euros is equal to the Romanian average wage (as of 2018) or a teacher’s pension, but comes with the added promise of a potential professional career in the ultimate sector of the future.¹⁰ This is clearly preferable to picking strawberries in Spain, harvesting asparagus in Germany, or caring for the Italian elderly, activities that are imagined as mere temporary escapes for the ‘other Romania.’ Among Cluj IT workers there is the omnipresent praise for ‘constant learning’ and challenge. This here is the ‘real education,’ ‘it is never boring’: lived mantras that reflect the very material market compulsion for constant adaptation, reinvention, and reorganization to which the sector, not sitting on much capital of its own, is even more consistently exposed than similar disruptive sectors in the West. Those workers who internalize these pressures best and know how to weaponize them are the ones selected for longer-term careers, and they sometimes rise up remarkably fast in the flat and similarly dynamic organizational hierarchies.

The IT world in Cluj is often described as a pyramid with a very broad base, a narrow and low middle, and a thin but extended peak. The top earns globally average wages all the way up to 10,000 euros a month or more. A few thousand developers get somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000; but below them salaries decline fast and close in on median levels that may be around 1,000 or lower, depending on the type of firm one is looking at (2018 figures, but the pyramid structure has not significantly altered in 2023). Some 80 percent of personnel may be in the lowest tier. Experienced product managers, business analysts, and HR personnel, who all play active roles in the organization and production of IT, rarely reach above 1,700 euros according to our discussions (2018), and most remain below. This is also true for positions that have global functions within a transnational corporation. Some well-trained and experienced people in their early thirties are running all-Romanian programs for large international consultancies such as Accenture, but their income rarely seems to reach above Western poverty lines, underlining the bargaining power of international capital in Romania.

Many people further note that while women occupy almost 40 percent of jobs in Romanian IT, which is higher than anywhere else in Europe, they do get paid less. These inequalities are liable to

get only deeper with over half the local economy considered vulnerable to automation (Petrovici and Faje 2019). Truly middle-class lives, with an apartment in the city, are led by couples who both work in qualified roles in IT. "Marriage is the only solution," one interlocutor admitted to us with dismay. But many couples break up. Corporate demands on time and energy are high, working hours are long, and there is a lot of new learning to do in one's 'spare time.' The pressures of childcare create extra stress, sometimes only relieved by the help of a grandmother on a pension. Is it coincidental that Cluj seems to encourage explorations into 'pluri-amorous' relationships among its thirty-something-year-olds?

Mayer Boc's rhetoric evokes a powerful illusion of Cluj as a 'creative city,' and his electorate clearly revel in that story. Even while enjoying the liveliness and dynamism of the local scene, and partly buying into the narratives of its city marketing, many of our interlocutors reject that attractive epithet. For an increasing number of citizens their daily reality is at least as well described by Neill Smith's notion of the 'revanchist city' (Smith 1996).¹¹ Classical ground rent drives its economy possibly more so than the productivity and prosperity of its IT workers. High reproduction costs push people relentlessly into markets and into self-exploitation in order to reach something like an adequate income at some point in the future. Their efforts and their wages then further fuel the ground rent. While in Cluj some IT entrepreneurs have reportedly been switching their investments into real estate, in a city like Iași it is the real estate capitalists who seek to develop the IT industry so as to secure sufficient demand for their office developments. The two, the productivity and the ground rent, then, are mutually reinforcing and together describe two of the three essential elements of the 'Cluj machine.'

Education and class, mutually entangled, form the third element. An economist and director of one of the largest outsourcing establishments in Cluj, one of our interlocutors, has argued that the fast rise of Cluj in IT production in the 2010s as compared to other cities in Romania must be explained by having the highest density of students (Surdea-Blaga 2018). It is the ultimate student city, with around 80,000 in a population of almost 400,000. He knows what he is talking about intimately, because he has years of experience in managing the recurrent inflow of new young workers into his own 'plantation.' As an economist, however, he falls back on quantitative data and comparative arguments about correlations, while failing to put the finger on the exact social relations and dynamics involved. As anthropologists we feel confident to say more.

The average age in IT production sites in Cluj seems to vary from a low median of 22 years in the big multinational outsourcers to around 28 years in the more complex ones. Many of the workers that we interviewed started in low-paid entry jobs in the night shift, or with flexible hours while studying. They found it impossible to sustain themselves in the city with limited parental and state/university support. The best students in Romania get a state stipendium, but the great majority of students find it hard to access sufficient funds for full-time study. The underinvestment of the state into its higher education sector produces a large, fresh, young, and flexible working class for the least paid jobs in the outsourcing sectors, receiving initial wages of 700–900 euros (in 2023; the national average net salary in 2023 is 900 euros). Often, they begin as volunteers in order to learn the basic skills, tipped by their friends or kin who are already in there. The IT and BPO sectors yearly suck in thousands of students who come to Cluj with hopes of professional development in the social sciences and humanities, but who cannot support themselves in those careers. Not surprisingly, quite a few of our interviewees ultimately dropped out of their classes from sheer fatigue and depression. Our interviews, predictably, also indicate that students from middle-class urban backgrounds—or, even better, those born and raised in Cluj itself, with the best schools in the region—not only seem to have greater chances to claim state stipends, they also receive more financial support from their parents and are more likely to actually finish their degrees. Educational neoliberalism in Romania, combined with an unaffordable ‘revanchist city,’ thus serves to funnel, year after year, thousands of aspiring working-class students from the provinces into the urban ‘service plantations’ of the outsourcing industry. The Cluj machine feeds from the dreams of the young adolescents escaping ‘the other Romania.’

Directors and HR personnel made it very clear to us that the IT sector in Cluj not just thrives on all these non-engineers, it actually needs them. It needs them for three essential reasons. First, in order to contain salary levels, ‘converted’ university dropouts or social science and humanities BAs and MAs are considerably cheaper than credentialed computer and IT scientists, and they can be trained to do the less tech-heavy work on human resource management, project management, infrastructure maintenance, website maintenance, testing, communication with clients, marketing, and even ‘front-end development.’ Secondly, they are actually better on the communication-heavy ‘relational tasks’ because they appear to be “less nerdy.” Thirdly, the effort to move into richer service packages for clients—

'the disruptive outsourcing' proclaimed by the big consultancies—depends to a great extent precisely on the nontechnically educated. But here is the bottom line: for systematic cost-containment, the young university dropouts, no matter what they were once trying to study or become, are essential. As many of our higher-up interlocutors emphasized, degrees are positively irrelevant; what is required are "functional illiterates" with a willingness to submit to training and reconversion, work long hours, and keep up with it. The heroic dropout of Silicon Valley fame, who quits studying in order to strike big in the app world, is replaced here by the involuntary school dropout whose value lies in endless malleability, flexibility, and a capacity to labor.

It is tempting to keep thinking with the figure of the dropout a bit longer, dropout now in a somewhat larger sense. It is broadly known that labor turnover within the IT and BPO economy of Cluj is of epic proportions as compared to the West. It is around 25 percent per year, meaning that, on average, half of all workers leave their firm within two years (2018 figures); the best reputed firms have a percentage in the low twenties, the worst around thirty. Part of this is explained by the sheer dynamism of a boom-type of development that is just ten years old and transforming local society deeply. After two years, the 22-year-old dropout from sociology or theater studies, who is now trained in basic skills for the lower tiers of the production process in IT outsourcing, applies to a fast-growing new firm for a higher wage. Thousands of such switches happen every year. Or a 25-year-old computer science BSc now a trained developer, has acquired fame in the networks and is headhunted by one of the firms that seek higher value in product development. Dozens of such transfers are going on every season. But a significant though hardly ever discussed part of labor turnover is young working-class university dropouts, who had little choice but to sustain themselves via IT work, leaving their jobs, perhaps because in the end they remembered they had actually wanted something else for their lives than hard work and long hours for a corporation; or who simply collapse from exhaustion and need time to rethink and reboot; or who abruptly decide to emigrate to Western Europe where some of their friends are, for example to try once more for an MA in a field that one really likes, but this time in Denmark or Norway, with support from the local state that Romania denies its students. It is our claim, then, that another form of dropping out may well explain a good part of the labor turnover phenomenon so characteristic of the Cluj boom. How much might it explain? One third, one half, more? It is hard to say,

because in Cluj, not surprisingly, one also tends to hear class-biased readings of the local labor turnover syndrome, emphasizing the stories of the aspiring people who are doing well out of it, and who remain in view.

In this transformational, high-pressure, outsourcing context, it appears almost imperative that the generation of value, to a considerable extent embodied in the transitive figure of the dropout, be mystified by the form of creativity. It is no wonder then that IT workers are often described as “pampered” and “entitled,” their lives unfolding in a tightly insulated, cozy bubble. Creativity, and the so-called pampering that goes with it, may be merely illusive but for many it is no less compelling. Creative outsourcing is the Cluj version of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011).

Bubble Consciousness

What’s the point in going home when you love it at the office?

—Business analyst, female, BA Sociology

I come into the office at 9 a.m., I leave at 6 p.m., and my whole day is spent in English and in a very particular kind of office environment: it’s like a parallel world. All day long, I interact with Western clients, Western business procedures; it’s like living in a different country.

—Shared service center manager, BA Economics

Going out of their bubble is a challenge for creatives. Outside the creative bubble, on the periphery, life is not just play and fun but also power relations and authorities

—Lala Panait¹²

“The promise of the Romanian Silicon Valley story drives many new developments, and brings new work models and corporate cultures, from horizontal co-working environments to managerial hierarchies, work-from-home shifts, or office-space architecture. With them, work dynamics are also changing.”¹³ So announces the exhibition PPM#5, opened in October 2020 by the curatorial collective *Aici Acolo*, whose trademark is the organization of pop-up exhibitions in the unused or abandoned spaces of Cluj. One of the exhibits, *Noul Mono Bloc* (The New Mono Block), is a satirical promotional material for a new real-estate development, an entire building dedicated to “work and only work,” which compresses living, office, leisure, and consumption spaces, thereby saving the time and energy of the resident workers

who have no need to ever get out. The artist (also a member of the anarchist publishing house *Pagine Libere*) designed it as a holding pen for "the pool of precarious labor meant for boring and unimaginative work." As a structure of containment, the mono block collapses work, home, and life into a single space defined by its sealed interiority, which, by denying the urban outside with all its problems, can sustain the fiction that "everything is, in fact, fine." This might very well be the inverse of "the social factory" of Italian autonomist Marxism (Gill and Pratt 2008; Campbell 2018), with the whole of the urban and social reproduction subsumed by capital (also, Kalb 1997), walled in and evacuated of the initial political optimism of that tradition: post-Fordist immaterial labor has neither escaped the laws of capitalist value nor has it unleashed the presumably revolutionary potentials of the multitude. Instead, the political subject has taken shelter in a bubble that promises mere comfort.

With their clean lines, airy and light interiors, transparent and glossy surfaces, IT offices are a far cry from the socialist factories on whose ruins they are built. But the difference goes beyond design: it is a matter of workplace environment and corporate culture, imported from global hi-tech hotspots like Silicon Valley, oftentimes as a joyfully accepted form of discursive dumping that mimics the inequalities of the outsourcing value chain that sustains it (see also Nadeem 2011). In contrast to the public sector or Romanian-owned companies, the offices of multinational corporations are attractive because they emphasize transparency and respect for employees, while downplaying hierarchy and rigid management. "At the multinationals, everything is shiny. . . . The workplace is humane. Nobody shouts at you; nobody acts in an authoritarian or bossy manner. Everyone is considerate. We're all people, we all work, we act like civilized, nice people" (service delivery, female, BA European Studies). The sparse design livened by occasional splashes of vivid color—beanbags, posters, and, of course, logos—is reflected back into organizational forms that are "lean," "agile," and "dynamic." The sense of belonging experienced by IT workers, the feeling of "being at home from the start," is enhanced by the constant teamwork and the responsibility they feel toward people with whom they work closely, sharing space, meetings, and ceremonies, particularly so in the framework of Agile software development with its collective rituals of 'sprint' and 'scrum.' Often, this relationship is expressed in hyperbolic terms of attachment—"I love my office"; "I'm in love with my company"; "This is heaven on earth"—that do not simply index the effectiveness of employee branding operations in the media, with

their emphasis on enthusiasm and passion at work, but also mark the distances (spatial and conceptual) traveled by these young workers while parsing the horizon of their realistic alternatives in Europe and Romania.

Ping-pong championships, table football, guitar playing, swimming, Buddhist stress management, yoga, therapy, massage, wine tasting, ceramic painting, karaoke, cooking lessons, book clubs, theater—this is just a sample of activities taking place in the offices of large IT companies in Cluj. One might be justified in assuming the office has become a vast playground for the “no-collar” workforce (Ross 2004). Indeed, it is this apparent leisure richness, coupled with the high salaries excepted from tax and the multitude of perks, that prompts the (self) characterization of IT workers as “pampered” (*răsfățați*). The comparisons drawn by the interviewees with the working lives of their parents and siblings point out the deeply felt discrepancies between their pampering and the bareness and hardships of socialist factory life, and postsocialist underemployment amid deindustrialization and migrant labor. In doing so, they distinguish not just among the gradations in a range of amenities—from having a fridge or an ergonomic chair at work to the luxury of being able to choose between twenty different kinds of tea, or between gym and pool subscriptions. But implicitly, they rank kinds of labor that they can, in a sense, also outsource—from having a full-time cleaning lady at the office, who saves them the trouble of washing coffee cups; to having the attention of mentors, career coaches, and personal development specialists who assist them in the endless labor of “bringing in value” by setting them on the path to “becoming,” “improving,” “learning,” and “growing as a person” (see also Gog and Simionca 2020).

Similarly, corporate social responsibility (one of the most successful non-monetary benefits, alongside flexible hours and working from home, in countering employee turnover) externalizes to the corporation the job of curating by committee the forms of acceptable social and cultural activism. While Christmas packages for children and tree planting are universally approved, the stakes become controversial when employees contemplate interventions in the field of identity politics (Is it ok to support LGBTQ rights?),¹⁴ or programs that smack of ‘social assistance’ rather than cultural or educational uplifting (mostly in the form of coding instruction for children and teenagers, who will, after all, become the future labor pool).

There is, in fact, a suspicion of the social, fueled by the omnipresent narrative of an inefficient and corrupt state that steals via taxa-

tion the hard-won earnings of IT workers and passes them on to the non-deserving folks inhabiting 'the other Romania.' Even for many people who identify themselves on the Left, the moral equation is stark: the corporation is good, the state is bad. "It's the corporation that pays for the roof over my head and for my medical treatment, not the state" (service desk analyst, female, MA Translation). Notwithstanding the factual tax exemption for IT workers, a common complaint is that they are being conned into paying "the salaries of all these state employees" and for "the upkeep of all these illiterates who don't work," even while lamenting the sad state of public education and health. The Romanian version of moralized neoliberalism (Muehlebach 2012) is built on a stark sense of meritocracy that cherishes the productivity of the IT worker and rejects redistribution toward "the lazy" in favor of "a moralist bubble on the cultural plane" (State 2019: 80). The social Darwinism (Kalb 2019) implicit in this moralist bubble is disavowed by the triple commitment to anti-corruption, meritocracy, and good governance. In the process, class and inequality get displaced by culture and identity politics.

In a March 2021 debate on a Facebook group for people looking to rent an apartment in Cluj, almost five hundred people posted comments in a string dedicated to the disparity between rents and salaries in the city. Is Cluj affordable only for IT workers? Should that be so? A sharp divide emerged between those with net salaries below 800 euros and those above; those who failed short of the mark were advised to upskill, work hard, and stop being lazy, or to simply take themselves off to a cheaper city. It is not surprising that most of those doing the advising worked in IT. They then came under a barrage of accusations framed not in terms of classes, but of bubbles: "Sorry to burst your bubble;" "Get out of your own bubble;" and "You're too happy in your little bubble." Notwithstanding the self-ironic usage of the term—when turned inward to familiar social and cultural routines within the limits of a shared urban enclave—bubbles burst with aggression when directed outward. Bubble consciousness grows with the alignment of productive, progressive, and anti-corrupt IT workers who feel secure in their disdain for unproductive, reactionary, and corrupt others. Bubbles are where class fragments along lines of culture, value, and hierarchy.

From the very beginning of fieldwork, we were struck by this insistent talk of bubbles: creative, IT, and activist. The overwhelming concern with bubbles is not merely a recognition of the speculative regime of outsourcing labor—in other words, the existence of

Cluj as just another fragile bubble on a global chain of value (but see below). Migrating from the social media coinage of “filter bubbles,” it has evolved into a social and cultural recognition of the propagation of enclaves that are comfortable in their isolation. In this context at least, within the bubble is complacent coziness while without is anxious torment. Labor consists in defending the thin bubble membranes and maintaining the illusion of pampering.¹⁵ In a wider sense, bubble consciousness defines the whole postsocialist history of the city, launched in 1992 with Caritas, a massive pyramid scheme that inducted Cluj citizens into the possibilities of endless financial accumulation and unstoppable growth (Verdery 1995). As a local artist and activist, Szakats (2021) notes perceptively, Caritas was the first postsocialist exercise in the normalization of the Great Public Fiction of Cluj. Unsurprisingly, in 2021, City Hall denied permission for an artistic exhibit about Caritas in the city center, as this would have only served as a reminder about losses, extraction, entrenched inequalities, and burst bubbles.

The Politics of Leftovers

The Cheesecake Meme

In response to a question about participation in political protests (this interview happened in the wake of anti-corruption demonstrations), Mihai, a support engineer and self-described “IT janitor, poet, and ironist,” veers instead to the possibilities of office food leftovers. As “political opinions take time,” he would rather invest his energy in scrounging cooking oil and leftover milk from work, “much like they used to steal onions from the collective farm.” Leftovers enable him to save on food expenses when he is strapped for money, but also to make a virtue out of necessity by playing with the combinatory aesthetics of repurposing residues, in a parody of corporate resilience. The pinnacle of his efforts was “a proof-of-concept cheesecake” made entirely from leftover ingredients:

Pretzels ground into biscuit and brown sugar from work with a bit of milk, turned into cottage cheese and whisked until it was creamy. On top of everything, apple jam. This was at a time when everyone was disenchanted with the lack of salary raises. Such a gesture of beautiful defiance instilled courage into my co-workers, and I became a small local hero. But then came HR and took me to task: Why are you bragging about this? And I was like: I did it for the memes, you know?

Pizza and Profit

Looking back at his attempt to organize a strike at his former cake shop, Vlad—artist and IT support worker—uses the ritual of handing out pizza leftovers to question the redistribution of profit in his current IT company:

In the two years I've been here, the department drew in more clients and more profit. But nothing goes to the workers who made it possible. This is what annoys me, the difference between what we do and what they represent to the clients. When they want to attract a new client, they have meetings with food, drinks. . . then they come to us with the leftovers and say "Guess what? Free pizza, guys!" I see everyone getting up and going into the kitchen for a slice of pizza. I look at them falling for the same tricks the PSD [Social Democratic Party] is using when they hand out free plastic buckets in the electoral campaign. I can't accept this. You want to buy me with a slice of pizza? I piss on your pizza! I don't need it. They buy us, like we are pigs at the trough. But maybe my experiences and opinions are too extreme. When I tell my colleagues this, they laugh but they still take the free pizza. It's incredible. The problem is that nobody thinks like me.

In the two vignettes above, Mihai and Vlad are both converts to IT, in their late twenties, working in support jobs for large outsourcing companies, subsidiaries of multinationals. Their biographies overlap to a great extent: they come from working-class families (parents were factory workers) in small Romanian towns, and they are the first generation to get a university education (Mihai dropped out after two years of Philology, while Vlad got a degree in Political Science). They were drawn to Cluj by the promise of steady employment after trying factory work, seasonal service jobs (including abroad), and short-term gigs. The IT jobs are seen as a route to survival, while their passions lie respectively in writing poetry and drawing. Both would probably agree they inhabit the emerging global class of the cybertariat (Huws 2014) or cyber-proletariat (Dyer-Witheford 2015).

Mihai and Vlad are part of a growing population of young university dropouts and graduates going through professional reconversion to IT. They learned on their own or on the job, unlike most people who pay for reconversion courses and/or accept unpaid internships. They are the leftovers of a labor market that has very little room for poets or visual artists or, for that matter, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, theologians or philosophers. Drawn to IT by the expectation of high salaries, the futuristic horizon of technology, and the cosmopolitan promise of 'siliconization,' they rarely manage to ascend to the coveted status of 'developer' (at most in front-end

development), staffing instead the lower-tier and lower-paid support and service sectors of IT, software, and game testing, as well as the nontechnical positions in human resources, marketing, and business analysis (with the possibility of advancing to service or project managers). As Vlad put it, “We’re the field laborers, the barons are in coding. We’re the plebs, sweating it off.” He echoes here the perspective of many other support workers who see themselves as “modern slaves” toiling on “the new assembly line” and getting “half the pay they deserve” for performing work that is “both challenging and grinding” and with none of the creativity accolades bestowed on code developers (who refuse to see the ingenuity that goes into the repair and maintenance of support infrastructures). Many quit after two or three years, overcome by the punishing rhythm of night shifts, the pressure of being constantly on-call, the grueling volume of work, and the unfulfilled promises of salary raises and advancement. When they do quit, it is often after severe episodes of insomnia, eating disorders, depression, or sheer “psychic exhaustion” (as Vlad says).

Those who manage to convert all the way to coding work have to put in extra effort, time, and energy in assimilating and keeping up with technology changes. For them, the IT imperative of lifelong learning starts as an uphill struggle to reimagine themselves as analytical, algorithmic thinkers capable of organizing code and life into a logical progression of tasks: “Everything is cast as a task: work task, gym task. I have daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly goals. I’m always planning. I plan my every mood” (tester, BA Public Administration). This is all in the hope that fragmented tasks can eventually be reassembled into projects of value—with themselves as primary value bearing subjects and ruthless curators: “I’ve reduced my circle of friends so that I strictly have only people that I can learn from and who can learn from me. I’m trying to extract value and to give value in every interaction I have” (front-end developer, BA Political Science).

The constant demand for labor in IT, familiar from other outsourcing contexts such as India (Upadhy 2016), has generated an entire local ecology of reconversion opportunities in Cluj—informal IT schools, coding academies, and company-organized trainings—that overlap with and feed off the abundance of digital resources for online learning, from Google and Reddit to tutorials and online courses, as well as more specialized repositories of coding knowledge such as the indispensable Stack Overflow or Github. Reconversion is more than just another instance of ‘digital catch-up’ or ‘reskilling’ meant to carve out a future for work in the wake of impend-

ing automation. It is, however, deeply connected to this overarching discourse of digitalization as the key to social inclusion, resilience, innovation, and, increasingly so, urban governance.¹⁶

Shying away from outright placement, some of these IT reconversion sites also act as labor clearinghouses, mediating between their graduates and locally based companies, especially as the mentors are themselves IT workers. The courses answer to market requirements, from the initially popular testing and Java to the currently trendy Python, RPA, and UX design. This adaptation is reflected also in the screening procedures, which select for "proactivity, creativity, flexibility, good communication and English skills" (the same criteria companies advertise for), rejecting 60 percent of the candidates in an attempt to keep only those fit for IT work, but also "to keep things clean" by weeding out problematic psychological profiles ("narcissists and manic-depressives") considered unfit for teamwork and sustained productivity.¹⁷ Furthermore, reconversion is formatted to the specifics of IT outsourcing, so much so that the design of some of the courses follows the workflows of developer teams sprinting towards delivery, and emphasizes the modular philosophies of management (Agile) and programming (object-oriented).¹⁸

In the process, IT converts are taught to abstract: they are initiated into algorithmic thinking, the logical sequences of pseudocode, the prompts of code editors and the "abstractions" of OOP, but they are also shown how to abstract *from*—that is, how to ignore all that is irrelevant to a given project, focusing only on what can be used now, and reused in future projects. IT labor is abstract indeed, not particularly in the sense of "immaterial" (Lazzarato 1996), but rather in its navigation of a series of layers of abstraction, and the forms of compartmentalization and bracketing these rely upon. What is left out—the leftovers—is any sense of the wider structures in which these abstractions travel, or the kinds of politics they might be answerable to.¹⁹ Becoming socialized in abstraction goes hand in hand with the abiding suspicion of the social.

What we call the politics of leftovers recapitulates and condenses the perspective of these recent IT converts—poised between precarity and pampering—as "global value subjects" (Dyer-Witthoford 2001) equipped to address not just the imperative of added value but also its distribution across the global chains. They understand that outsourcing exists within a framework of inequality that captures locally produced value, turning Cluj into a cost center of low-complexity and low-value activities—the leftovers—while the core, high-value competences are kept further up the chain (Hardy and Hollinshead

2016; Guga and Spataru 2021). This “experience of differential valuing of labor” (Vora 2015: 69) turns workers like Mihai and Vlad into contemporary gleaners who cannot afford to ignore the remainders and scraps at the periphery (Bize 2020), even while they ironically repurpose them (as they themselves were repurposed from artists to coders) or reject them in impotent rage and resentment. Of course, it is also possible to grab them gracefully, with the kind of pragmatic determination that recycles resilience into elegance, as Maria (IT marketing, BA Sociology) does when she “splurges” to buy clothing from Zara outlets rather than buying secondhand. After all, the downtown of Cluj is ringed with countless outlet stores and second-hand clothing shops brimming with the leftovers of global brands and last year’s fashions.

Conclusion

Contemporary accounts of creative economies emphasize the increasing tendency of labor to spill over: it can no longer be contained within the workplace and work time, or even within organizational structures. Bolstered by digital technologies, the discourse of flexibility threatens not just to blur but to erase the distinctions between “the private and the public, free time and work time, exploitation and emancipation, alienation and fulfilment, and work and play” (Bilic, Primorac, Valtysson 2018: 13; see also Gregg 2011). The new workplace is a sprawling complex of physical and digital spaces that aggregate into hubs, clusters, and networks (Gill, Pratt, and Virani 2019; Zukin 2020) along urban lines and across the uneven intersections of global chains of production and value. Increasingly so, labor is displaced to the non-place of automation, floating away in ghostly fashion into the seemingly virtual infrastructures of cloud computing under the surveillance of robotic processes (Moore 2018; Gray and Suri 2019).

As you enter the UiPath organized RPA League Kick-off (RPA: Robotic Process Automation), you are faced with a large poster of an astronaut perched on a chunk of slowly disintegrating matter, gazing complacently into the cosmos: “Getting a sci-fi job title is no longer science fiction.” Another one depicts a suited-up figure overlooking an urban palimpsest where the recognizable landscape of Cluj is consumed by futuristic visions of glowing light, a sanitized Blade Runner metropolis: “Join the RPA League to become an Automaton Overlord.” The conference hall of the Cluj Hub co-working space



Figure 7.2. Cluj with new offices in background. © Oana Mateescu and Don Kalb

is filled with students and IT workers eager to sign up for the RPA League—the free teaching platform provided by UiPath—and to share into the success story of the first Romanian unicorn.²⁰ The presentations by the staff of the newly opened UiPath office in Cluj emphasize the potential of robotic process automation “to reboot work” by eliminating all the repetitive and lower-value tasks, and thus freeing humans to be creative. “Work is history.” Of course, this bright future requires immediate initiation into the mysteries of RPA which, we are told, is accessible even to people without coding knowledge, and will soon become an indispensable digital skill, much as Microsoft Office was once considered. In an interview with the head of the UiPath office in Cluj, he elaborates on the impact that RPA can have on “the paradox of creativity” —the split between IT engineers and other people in Cluj—by allowing people outside the field of IT to do automation intuitively, and reach for “the Holy Grail of tech work.” IT reconversion programs might provide you with coding skills, but these will soon be outdated (via the automation of front-end programming); by contrast, “with RPA you can do anything” and, at the same time, be shielded from the fear that your job will be automated. In this spirit, UiPath offers courses for

the universities in the city; indeed, their RPA platform has recently become the core of an entrepreneurship and innovation scholarship at the largest university in Cluj, luring students with the promise of “high-income skills” and “unfireable jobs.”²¹

Mihai and Vlad are more attuned to the politics of leftovers. Also, perhaps, their support jobs are first in line for automation, in their case via cloud computing. Mihai, with four years more experience on the job, is keenly aware of the successive waves of abstraction transforming and potentially deskilling or eliminating work: “The IT bubble in Cluj will partially burst, everything that is IT support entry level. Because it’s moved to the cloud, it’s someone else’s business now. You need less-qualified people, since the infrastructure that was previously hosted on physical machines has now become a virtual machine, delivered as a service.” The effect of labor arbitrage in outsourcing is usually a redivision of labor; in fact, Peck (2017: 204–9) sees the basic charge of the global outsourcing complex as “the decomposition, migration, and recombination of tasks” followed by standardization and deskilling, which in their turn pave the way for automation. When workers like Mihai and Vlad (and their employers) imagine their futures, it is as “new age janitors,” tending to software robots or training algorithms, fighting over the scraps of labor left after the latest enclosures of cloud platforms.

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Notes

1. There is already a growing literature that explores the regimes of such urban laboratories: for example, Biagioli and Lepinay 2019; Gill, Pratt and Virani 2019; and Zukin 2020. On Cluj, see McElroy 2020.
2. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/210481530907970911/pdf/128064-SCD-PUBLIC-P160439-RomaniaSCDBackgroundNoteMigration.pdf>.
3. Personal communication with Dana Domșodi, December 2018.
4. The exemption from the 10 percent income tax applies to IT workers directly involved in the production and editing of software; support and service workers in IT are excluded. All IT workers still have to pay the obligatory social contributions (health and pension), which reach 37 percent. See Guga and Spătari 2021 for a critique of the IT tax exemption.
5. Personal communication Alex Cistelecan, December 2018.
6. While Silicon Valley is the ultimate model of tech-driven urbanism for much of the region, the urban innovation programs proposed by the Cluj Cultural Center evolved out of conversations with New Urban Mechanics in Boston.
7. The same can be said of Romanian IT on the whole (Guga and Spătari 2021), with the exception of Romanian-owned Bitdefender and unicorns such as robotic process automation UiPath (which, however, moved its headquarters to New York) and, more recently, blockchain and fintech start-up Elrond, which emerged out of Sibiu but is actually incorporated in Malta.
8. Interview Andrei Roth, UiPath Cluj, September 2019.
9. If we include 'business process outsourcing' the number is closer to 35,000. The separation between the sectors is not sharp. The upper layers of BPO in terms of skill and pay merge with the middle layers of IT, and quite a bit of the less-skilled labor processes in IT resemble BPO, in particular website maintenance. For 2023, the number of IT employees (excluding BPO) in Cluj is estimated at 25,000.
10. Romanian average net salary for 2023 has risen to around 900 euro; lowest salaries in IT (entry level customer support) are still below (around 700–800 euro).
11. In a study of cafe culture in Cluj, Petrovici and Faje (2019) operate with the same premise of the revanchist city, arguing, though, that this has not produced a

- revanchist discourse among the emerging middle classes of Cluj, who are open to discourses of tolerance, diversity, and even social justice. This claim relies on the protests and progressive movements of the early 2010s; however, these have lost steam, and the promise of Cluj as a left-progressive center (Clapp 2017) has not been vindicated.
12. In February 2018, anthropologist Lala Panait was the guest speaker at *Creative Mornings* (the franchise of a global event, with English as the default language) on the premises of Cluj Hub, the largest co-working space in Cluj, occupying the top floors of a former socialist commercial complex, where she discussed community work in the city, focusing on the project of urban gardening undertaken by the association Colectiv A at *La Terenuri* in the former working-class neighborhood of Mănăştur (Panait and Medeşan 2016).
 13. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <https://www.aiciacolo.ro/tagged/ppm5>.
 14. A question of office politics exacerbated by the 2018 family referendum (Mateescu 2018).
 15. Interestingly enough, Sloterdijk's (2013: 211–22) philosophical anthropology of global capitalism anticipates the Cluj preoccupation with both “bubbles” and “pampering.”
 16. See the Future of Work program, currently underway at the Urban Innovation Unit, a partnership between the municipality and Cluj Cultural Center. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <https://diviziadeinovare.ro/future-of-work/>.
 17. Interview with CEO of Informal IT School. The discussion here is based on participant observation at an “Introduction to IT” course, and interviews with mentors and graduates of reconversion courses.
 18. Wark (2017) also remarks upon the remarkable suitability of object-oriented programming (OOP) to outsourcing.
 19. Malazita and Resetar (2019) go as far as claiming that practices of abstraction instilled in early-stage computing education produce “anti-political subjects”; for more nuanced views, see Amrute 2016, and Irani 2019. For the politics of IT labor on the global peripheries, see Takhteyev 2012, Chan 2013, and Beltran 2020.
 20. In venture capital parlance, a unicorn is a privately held start-up with a valuation of over 1 billion USD. Robotic process automation start-up UiPath was the first Romanian example, even though it has now moved its headquarters to New York.
 21. Retrieved 30 March 2021 from <https://aubb.granturi.ubbcluj.ro/activitati-studenti-v9/>.

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“AS MUCH VALUE AS POSSIBLE”

Construction, Universities, Finance, and the “Greater Good” in
the North East of England

Sarah Winkler-Reid



Introduction

In Newcastle upon Tyne and across the North East region of England,¹ major construction projects including hotels, offices and high-rise ‘build-to-rent’ apartments, funded through financialized capital, have recently been transforming skylines and city and town centers. Concurrently, the five universities in the region, seeking to attract increasing numbers of students, have undertaken significant construction and renovation on their campuses, committing 750 million pounds between 2016 and 2022 to these projects. Benefiting from this expanding student population, private purpose-built student accommodation has also been proliferating in these urban settings.

This chapter explores these processes of construction, urban development, and education-driven capital expansion at a particular front-line, the (re)development of the formerly industrial North East of England. As I will show, this value regime has been shaped through deindustrialization, government austerity, and the expansion of higher education through which deeply financialized urban growth seemingly offers a ‘win-win’ solution to a number of social and economic issues the region is facing. Drawing from fieldwork on construction and urban development across the region, I focus on these processes, as well as the perspectives of those invested in and helping



Figure 8.1. Hadrian's Tower under construction, in Newcastle upon Tyne.
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to reproduce this value regime. In this context, both programmatic and spontaneous conceptions of 'value' were articulated repeatedly by local politicians and construction industry professionals. As I will argue, the concept of value enabled these actors to conceive of the work they were doing in moral as well as economic terms, drawing on the specific history of the region in the process. These actors were finding and seeking to create 'social value' through their work, at the same time as they were caught up in, and reproducing, 'insidious' capitalist processes that also work in terms of value.

While this emic use of value envisioned a 'win-win' compatibility between 'surplus value' and 'use values,' moving beyond place-based accounts, I utilize value as an analytical term to make visible contradictions in this value regime, as pension funds, private investment, student loans, and billion-pound higher education debts tie people into precarious relations of dependency and indebtedness for generations to come. For anthropologists, local politicians, and construction professionals, value represents a concept through which to consider systems and processes of worth, relations between people, and relations toward the self in both economic and ethical terms. However, for these different actors, value enables different understandings of risk, how to care for others, and what is at stake, to come into relief.

Construction, Urban Development, and Value

In cities across the world, expanding processes of capital-driven urbanization are evident, funded by the proliferation of interest-bearing capital in circulation (Elinoff, Sur, and Yeoh 2017; Harvey

2017; Kalb 2020; Swider 2016). Land sale, property, infrastructure, and urban development are key ways through which capital is generated and circulated. Urban built environments are sought-after sites of investment, enabling the extraction of rent on land and property, and trading as assets on global capital markets (Drozd, Guironnet, and Halbert 2021; Harvey 2017). In these capital-driven contexts, “(construction) becomes a strategy of capital accumulation, changing from providing a means to an end to becoming an end in itself” (Swider 2016: 3–4).

Following the 2008 financial crisis, impositions on public spending meant that many local governments issued debt in order to fund urban services and infrastructures. Institutional investors (such as pension funds, private-equity funds, and sovereign wealth funds) are thus playing an increasingly central part in these urban investments and, subsequently, in urban governance (Drozd, Guironnet, and Halbert 2021). These processes draw the built environment, urban services, facilities, and infrastructures into high levels of indebtedness that make urban residents vulnerable to property boom and busts, and “exercise a coercive power” over the future (Harvey 2017: 149).

The exigent role that higher education is playing in these processes is observable across North America, Europe, and Australia, as universities are conceived as ‘anchor institutions’ around which companies and mixed-use development projects are based (Morris, Jones, and Wright 2010; Addie, Keil, and Olds 2015; Bose 2015). In deindustrialized contexts, the expansion and investment of successful universities is seen as offering an “urban model anchored around education, rather than commodities” (Bounds and Hale 2019). Higher education is viewed in this model as an industry, intertwined with business and government in a triple helix (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1995). New sites are being developed in joint ventures for state-of-the-art buildings, often on land vacated by industry.

While this sketches the large-scale patterns of financialized urban development as shaped by globally operating forces of economic value, value regimes are produced dialectically through specific ‘constituent histories,’ and the thinking and feeling subjects who inhabit them (Kalb, this volume). Recognizing this means taking into account the way aspects of human experience, often ignored in studies of the conventionally economic, or positioned as outside or opposed to capitalism, such as morality, care, and kinship, are intrinsic to its constitution (Bear et al. 2015; Fraser 2014).

Seeking to understand the forces of value at work in the North East of England, in 2018–19 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on

construction and urban development in the region.² In this deindustrialized context—more recently suffering from the unevenly distributed impacts of austerity—local government, universities, pension funds, private investors, and the construction industry all played an important part in the ongoing urban development. This chapter explores urban transformations in the city and region, both as a value regime shaped through globally circulating forces of economic value, and from the perspectives of the actors who inhabit this value regime and are involved in its production.

In this fieldwork, value represented both a guiding analytical concept from the outset of the project and an emic concept, utilized by my interlocutors in both programmatic and spontaneous ways, which emerged repeatedly (and unexpectedly) throughout my fieldwork. As I will explore, value is a concept that helps local politicians, construction industry professionals, and anthropologists to make sense of the complexities and contradictions of capitalist processes in neoliberal conditions of limited possibility. What is it about the concept of value that makes it so useful for these different actors to 'think with'? As Paul K. Eiss and David Pedersen review:

Divergent understandings of value have often been expressed in terms of dyadic distinctions: value is about measure or meaning; it is material or symbolic, secular or sacred, abstract or concrete, individual or collective, qualitative or quantitative, global or local. Its origins and content can be found in either production or in exchange, in structure or in process. (Eiss and Pedersen 2002: 283)

However, value's critical purchase can be located precisely in its ability to contain within it these different distinctions, manifold connections, plural and singular meanings and in its ability to hold these in analytic tension with each other, for example as in one dialectical regime of value, as Don Kalb argues in the Introduction (see also Skeggs 2011).

As Marilyn Strathern argues in her examination of the concept of 'relation'—similarly both a tool of anthropological inquiry and the focus of anthropological inquiry—"it is illuminating to envisage *the concept* as a piece of apparatus" (ibid.: 17), not separate from the phenomena being studied, but part of it. Apparatus enables both tools and objects to be kept in focus and challenge the separation between observer and observed. They are a specifying force through which certain processes and connections appear and through which relations are made explicit. As I will explore, while value is an apparatus used by different actors, and through which certain relations become

visible, what these relations are, the future they imagine, and what they reveal is at stake, differs significantly.

Value and Transformations in the North East

The North East of England “was one of the first industrial regions in the first industrial nation, and it was one of the first regions to experience massive de-industrialization” (Robinson 2002: 319). By the mid-nineteenth century, coal had replaced water as the primary source of power for industrialization, and coal was mined at increasingly greater volumes across the ‘Great North Coalfield’ of County Durham and southeast Northumberland. Developments in railways and steam engines enabled this coal to be transported to the rivers Tyne, Wear, Blyth, and Tees, and shipped across the world (Robinson 2002; Byrne 2002; TW sitelines 2012). Coal production increased significantly from “4.5 million tons in 1800, to 10.5 million tons in 1850 and 45 million tons by 1900” (TW sitelines 2012), with Newcastle as the administrative center of this global export trade (Vall 2007).

“Coal fueled and fostered the related staple industries of ‘carboniferous capitalism’: iron and steel, shipbuilding, heavy engineering and chemicals” (Mess 1928, in Robinson 2002: 318); and at the start of the twentieth century, half of the world’s ships were being built in the North East (Oral History Unit and Collective, Newcastle University n.d.). Between 1801 and 1921, the population grew from 600,000 to over 3 million, with people migrating to the region from other parts of Britain, as well as Ireland, Scandinavia, Germany, and the Baltic (Byrne 2002). In the nineteenth century, pitmen and shipyard workers were among the highest paid in the world (ibid.). The industrializing North East was key to the expanding British Empire (Hudson 2005), and was thus constitutive of, as well as constituted by, a racializing colonial capitalism, which included “the racialization (and later de-racialization) of parts of the European descended proletariat” (Bhambra 2017; Virdee 2019: 22). The North East worker, a symbol of the ‘Iron North,’ came to encompass “a virtuous sense of masculine pride, labor, and white credentials” (Nayak 2003: 15).

Processes of deindustrialization were long and uneven, as Robinson charts: “[E]conomic collapse in the 1930s, followed by wartime re-armament, then postwar reconstruction and the ‘long boom’ of the 1950s, and, later, decline accelerated by severe recession and restructuring in the Thatcher years” (Robinson 2002: 318; Hudson 2005). The area lost 38 percent of its jobs between 1978 and 1984, with 22 percent of the population leaving the area between 1978 and

1991 (Nayak 2003). The last coal mine was closed in 1994, and by the turn of the twenty-first century, only one shipyard in the North East remained active (Robinson 2002). During this same period, the service sector expanded, employing an increasing number of women, often on part-time hours and flexible contracts (Byrne 2002; Nayak 2003; Hudson 2005).

The deindustrialization of the North East does not erase its industrial history. An interdisciplinary literature on deindustrialization has explored its 'half-life', present in meanings, persons, landscapes, and memories, the economic and social damage inflicted, and the ongoing "struggle with loss and change" (Linkon 2018: 5). Thus, as research in the North East shows, deindustrialization produces a reconfiguration of selves shaped through specific family and community histories of labor (Byrne 2002; Nayak 2003; Goodwin-Hawkins and Dawson 2018). Labor family histories were very much part of my fieldwork, a common way people situated and described themselves as part of a generational history. As I will argue, these histories of industrialization and deindustrialization are drawn upon in the projects of influential local actors to inform their orientation to, and investment in, contemporary urban development.

(Re)Development and the Role of Universities

For Newcastle upon Tyne specifically, the 1990s entailed a city-wide regeneration strategy, which included creating value through tourism, a 'night-time economy,' growing knowledge and service sectors, redevelopment of the city center and Newcastle Gateshead Quayside, and arts- and culture-led investment (Bailey, Miles, and Stark 2004; Hollands and Chatterton 2003; 2002; Schoneboom 2020; Veldpaus and Pendlebury 2019).³ City council policy in this period was pervaded by the language of 'urban renaissance' (Cameron 2003). The result was the recognizable form of a 'postindustrial city' observable in many formerly heavily industrialized cities across the North Atlantic: "[A] lively cultural district; expansive university, medical, and technological complexes; and vibrant residential neighborhoods. Capital subsidies, place promotion, supply-side intervention, central-city makeovers, and place branding" (Neumann 2016: 6). As Tracy Neumann further highlights, conceptualizations of the city played an important part in these material processes "through which urban constituencies articulated and enacted competing visions for cities after the decline of manufacturing" (ibid.: 10). Thus, decades later,

the commonsense necessity of growth and vibrancy, was something I was often told during my fieldwork:

From a political point of view . . . it is about creating a better city. It is about creating a vibrant city. And if you want a vibrant city, no city stands still . . . You need to continue to develop and grow . . . You can never stand still. That is the driving force that we need, that commercial vitality to drive the economy of the city. If you drive the economy of the city, you will create better opportunities with residents. (Senior council official)

Since the global financial crash of 2008, when construction in the region drew to a sudden halt, major building work has been increasing in the region. During my fieldwork, skylines were being transformed by the construction of a number of large buildings, with a significant number more in planning. These included hotels, offices, retail and leisure, and residential buildings.

A £330 million arena and waterfront complex was in planning, and is now under construction, on Gateshead Quayside. What would become Newcastle's tallest building, a 26-story apartment block, was being built, funded by a range of national and international private and institutional investors.⁴ Among the developments in other parts of the region are a 450,000 square foot residential, retail, office, and leisure riverside development in Durham,⁵ funded through an investment management company; a similarly large multipurpose riverside development in Sunderland, developed by the local council and funded by the pension fund Legal & General; and a £250 million 'digital city' project, including two 20-story towers in Middlesbrough, jointly funded by local government and a third-party consortium.⁶

Universities, and the students who attend them, are important in these processes of urban regeneration and (re)development. Student life is a "well-established part of a marketable urban lifestyle brand" (Chatterton 2010: 512). For example, Newcastle is considered by students a desirable location in which to study, not least for its 'party city' reputation (Ruii 2017). Students bring an estimated £500 million to the local economy each year (Holland 2018), with a student population that has risen by over 30 percent since the mid-1990s, and now represents approximately 20 percent of the total population of the city (Ruii 2017).

In Newcastle and across the North East, the regions five universities⁷ have been central to contemporary urban (re)development. Working together in a spending consortium known as a framework,⁸ they committed £750 million pounds to capital spending for the period 2016–22. The region's universities were not alone in this

commitment to capital spending; as the *Financial Times* reported, between 2016 and 2018 around £3 billion was borrowed by UK universities, and £2 billion of construction contracts were agreed or enacted between universities and contractors for the period 2017–20 (Plimmer and Viña 2016; Hale 2018a).

Relatedly, all five university locations have had varying amounts of privately owned, purpose-built (or renovated) student accommodation (PBSA) developed. These buildings have proliferated in university towns and cities throughout the UK (Mulhearn and Franco 2018). For example, over forty PBSAs have been built or renovated in Newcastle since 2008, each with hundreds of students accommodated in each development, such that the number of beds exceeds the students to fill them. Prior to 2014, an average of 550 student beds in PBSAs were built per year in Newcastle, rising to 2,316 in 2016 (Holland 2018). Between 2015 and 2017, 6,764 student beds had been approved, were under construction, or had been built (Ruiu 2017).⁹ In Shieldfield, a neighborhood of Newcastle close to the universities, twenty accommodations had been built in buildings vacated by the light industry that used to be there. Of the £130 million spent by developers on this Shieldfield land, 50 percent came from offshore companies (Heslop 2019), a pattern repeated elsewhere in the UK (Osborne and Barr 2018).

Austerity

At the same time as the city and towns of the North East are being transformed through urban development, there is persistent and growing inequality (Hudson 2005; Schoneboom 2020). This inequality has been intensified by the severe and fast cuts to public expenditure—including welfare, social care, and local government—instigated in the name of austerity by the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 and continued by successive Conservative governments (Clayton, Donovan, and Merchant 2015; Evans 2020; Hall 2017). While this challenge to the “postwar logic of welfare consensus” is observable in many countries in the Global North, it has been particularly pronounced in Britain (Koch and James 2022).¹⁰

During my fieldwork, I heard repeatedly from those working in local government¹¹ and the voluntary sector that times were unprecedentedly dire. Local councils are funded through a combination of central government grants and money raised from local taxes and charges, and have been among the institutions most impacted by the austerity regime, with government funding cut by about

50 percent from 2010 to 2018 (National Audit Office 2018).¹² One senior politician compared the current situation to when he entered local government in the early 1980s during the closure of the coal mines, the shipyards and other manufacturing; “It was hellish,” he described:

Oh God, the world was falling apart, there was Thatcher. I mean there were massive social crises going on out there. . . people were throwing themselves off the Tyne Bridge with despair every week. The manufacturing was being absolutely decimated; I mean I think we lost 160,000 jobs in the North East in manufacturing. . . shipyards, coal mines. . . It was a different world. That had a massive social impact.

“But,” he continued, “every single year we got more money than the previous year.” I asked, “So does it feel worse now than it did in the 80s?” “Yes,” he replied vehemently, “just sort of like not even in the same ballpark . . . No, within living memory it hasn’t been this bad before.”

At the same time as the swingeing cuts, local councils were also facing an increasing demand for services that they had a statutory duty to provide, such as for child and adult social care. As one senior local politician said: “It isn’t any longer a social security system to support you when you are in crisis . . . The consequences of austerity are huge; I think in the last year alone we have taken a hundred extra children into care. You know, that is beyond anything anyone ever imagined.” Another senior politician described a similar need for adult social care in their council:

If, in three years’ time, we spend every penny available in the budget on adult social care, [then] we don’t do anything else—no bins, no libraries, no leisure centers, no trading standards, no potholes, no lights, no grass cutting, no refuse collection—all the things that we have got to do anyway. We spend every penny on adult social care and don’t do anything else; we are tens of millions of pound short.

Researching in the city in 2018/19 it sometimes felt like living in two worlds, located in the same place. On the one hand, the universities were spending massively, “effectively insulated from austerity” (Mulhearn and Franco 2018: 481) due to student fees and loans. The construction industry, too, was buoyant with these university projects as well as a range of major new projects funded through financialized capital. By contrast, those working in local government and the third sector described how draconian budget cuts were severely impacting families and communities.¹³

But, of course, these processes were connected. For one, the financial sector had been saved in the preceding financial crisis precisely by the government taking over its losses and recapitalizing it so credit for private accumulation was easy to come by (Moschella 2011). At the same time, local councils were hobbled by severe austerity and budget cuts, and needed to be generating income as well. Entrepreneurial councils began investing in construction projects themselves, projects that would subsequently generate income for the local council through rent (Barnett et al. 2022; Beswick and Penny 2018). In a pattern observable in locations around the world, local governments with budgets significantly reduced by austerity have funded urban services and infrastructure through financial markets, increasing the "influence of capital markets in financing urban investment" and according "its institutions a new role in urban governance" (Drozd, Guironnet, and Halbert 2021).

'Social Value' in Dire Times

Our social value. . . is fantastic . . . I think the last figures are not far off 65 percent spent in the region, of money that we spend. . . Social value is what the government told us we have to take into account. So, it is a bit like corporate social responsibility. . . So, it was our response to that. . . for us it is apprenticeships, local jobs, investing in our local community . . . we have a really good model of what we have done.

— Senior local politician

In this context of austerity and the possibilities of revenue through financialized urban development, social value was utilized by local politicians as an apparatus through which to articulate moral projects that responded to transformations of the political as well as the momentum of neoliberal economic value. As I will show, the three local politicians on whom I focus in this section all conceived of the work they did in terms of a moral imperative to help the most vulnerable in society, contextualized within family histories of labor, and involvement in the labor and trade union movement. However, as they also made clear, this moral work to 'make a difference' was being undertaken under conditions of dwindling political resources, conditions that were set elsewhere and were out of their control, and that thus required the acceptance of compromise and pragmatism.

With cuts to social security enacted, Brexit looming, and fear that "right-wing politics will prevail," the Labour Party councilors expressed how hard it was to remain optimistic. However, as

they described, what kept them committed was the importance they saw in working on behalf of others. As one councillor described, he saw himself working for “the more disadvantaged people . . . this is going to sound terribly corny, but I have got a terrible sense of injustice. . . people are being exploited.” Another senior local councillor described what motivated her to take on a senior role during her retirement years: “I believe that we can make a difference. I think I would walk away if I didn’t believe that we could make a difference, [and] protect those that need us to protect them. And that we can try and do what we can to support those who are the least well integrated into our communities.”

In this position of limited possibilities, governmental requirements to achieve social value offered a way to make visible ‘positive difference.’ The Public Services (Social Value) Act was passed in 2012 and required “people who commission public services to think about how they can also secure wider social, economic and environmental benefits” (UK Government 2021). Thus, social value can be understood as a piece of apparatus, explicitly conceptualized as a way to think beyond price and make other kinds of benefit on the urban level visible, precisely at the moment that the central government was taking such benefits away as a social right. As described by the senior politician quoted at the start of this section, “I am always optimistic but. . . it is quite hard to remain optimistic. Which is why in my depths I will think of things that we have done well,” in this case “fantastic” social value, a procurement model that enabled them to invest in community, creating ‘good’ jobs (with permanent rather than zero hours contracts), and apprenticeships. Social value offered a way to hold on to positive contributions in the context of adverse circumstances, severe budget cuts and difficult decisions.

By requiring public service contracts to consider social value and how wider benefits could be created alongside economic benefits, value in this context became a tool through which to establish a ‘win-win’ relationship between surplus value and use values. Similar understandings of the possibility of generating social good from the pursuit of profit were expressed by a senior politician as he discussed his council’s entrepreneurial involvement in major redevelopment projects as a way to raise rents in order to pay for the budget shortfall. The council was funding a major development project of hundreds of millions of pounds, borrowing the money “cheaply” and taking on the risk of building the project to then rent it to a company on a forty-year lease. As the politician justified it, this was a “reasonable calculated risk” that was worth it for the benefits it could

provide, providing a return that could be used as an income stream to fund council services.

While working with the private sector in a shared endeavor of constructing financialized capital investment projects to generate rent, he distinguished between developers' motivations to generate surplus value, and the motivations of his council; he continued by emphasizing the moral dimensions of his endeavors:

People need to make a profit. It is not what motivates us (laughs). What motivates us is the services that the Council provides and improves the place. . . . I am a pragmatist, I have no problem at all with working with the private sector. I want businesses to thrive and grow because we all grow. . . . I am in a fortunate position that I am not 25 years old and obsessed about me political career. . . . I will do the right thing. And I think it is the right thing. [These decisions will be worth it] if we can build a better future.

Likewise, another senior politician expressed that their moral motivations, which stood apart from the pursuit of profit, played an important part in maintaining a balance between actors and forces in urban development, and ensuring these developments were not only generating profit but also social value for the good of the city. As she said, developers "don't have the same accountability or moral responsibility as we do as local councillors. Because they are in it for profit. I suppose it is the challenge between—I am a socialist you know—so it is a challenge between socialism and capitalism, isn't it?" (see also Ormerod 2021). This was thus a vision of a "better future," where surplus value was an essential prerequisite for the creation of social good. As one senior planner said:

You don't get any of the investment unless the developers are involved and taken with you. . . . They are not nasty people who are just here to suck money out of the system, which is what a lot of people think. Without them you don't get any investment, then you don't get any improvement, then you don't get the jobs, then you don't get the investment to improve the community.

For local politicians working with extremely limited resources, financialized urban development offered the hope of being able to utilize the momentum of surplus value creation for the generation of social value and the creation of revenue that could be used to support the most vulnerable in society: "Create jobs, reduce the demand for services, improve public health." While they described this as being done from a place of "pragmatism" necessary for making a positive difference in this "different world" they find themselves in, it also offered a vision of compatibility between different kinds

of value and the different motivations for producing it. This vision was achieved by foregrounding a specific relationship between these forms of value, one where the pursuit of profit was a necessary prerequisite for the generation of other kinds of ‘good,’ which directly benefited from capital success. At the same time, the damage that could be wrought by financialized urban development on the same people they were seeking to protect—dispossession, raising property prices, increasing inequality, and the precarity of indebted urban space (Drozd, Guironnet, and Halbert 2021)—is obscured from this vision. In these ways, we can recognize both the moral imperatives to work on behalf of others within a context of severely limited options and resources, and the ‘insidious’ way these result in an evermore financialized political and urban value regime.

Procuring and Producing Value: Fixing a Broken Industry While Seeking the “Greater Good”

Most developers focus on this thing called the iron triangle, ‘cost, value, time.’ But no one knows how to measure value, so they focus on time and cost—but those are just numbers. Value is the most important part of this, the other two are the wrong things to focus on. When you look at value, you realize it’s not a two-dimensional thing, but in fact a multidimensional thing. And it is all about value—that’s the only thing that matters.

—Construction project manager

This section shifts the focus toward those in the construction industry. Construction plays a centrally important part in urban development, transforming land into property, and finance into fixed capital. In contrast to the local politicians, the focus of construction industry professionals was not *what* should be built, but *how* it should be built. While occupying a different position within the value regime of urban development, and orientating themselves to a different set of problems, we can see a continuation of the way value as an apparatus has enabled moral projects to be connected to economic ones. Value was a concept with considerable purchase in construction industry forums, as professionals sought ways to think ‘beyond cost,’ and address the many problems facing the industry.

The construction industry in the UK is large and diverse, including the design, construction, and maintenance of buildings and infrastructure. From one perspective, construction is so varied that some have argued it is better understood in terms of interrelated sub-industries, a vast interconnection of competition, hierarchy, and friction-filled relationships (Dainty, Green, and Bagilhole 2007; Pink,

Tutt, and Dainty 2012; Sage and Vitry 2018). At the same time, the construction industry makes sense to itself as something that can be spoken about and imagined as a whole, a unity with a shared fate. I encountered this industry as intensely self-critical. The issues needing to be fixed were repeatedly rehearsed: skills shortage, ageing workforce, gender balance, carbon use and lack of sustainability, small profit margins, late payment, subcontractor squeeze, high number of faults, low productivity, and little investment in research and design. In the region, the hard times that the North East had experienced was often invoked as offering a model for collaboration as the industry called on itself to work together to address their problems "before it's too late." The construction industry in the region was described as "tight-knit" and "resilient," willing to work together in ways that the more prosperous South was not. As I was told, whereas "the Londons of this world" had hardly suffered from recession, people in the North East had had to work together in order to survive and thrive.

The quote at the start of this section is from a project manager, who spontaneously started sharing his perspective on value with me, during an industry event. As this quote indicates, value offered a way for people seeking to "fix the broken industry" to conceptualize the complexity and multidimensionality of what they were trying to achieve, and a way to go beyond the limitations of 'cost.' For example, this way of using value as an apparatus to encompass different forms of 'good', was observable in the report "Procuring for Value" (Construction Leadership Council 2018), which was released and presented around the country during my fieldwork. As this report presented, value could be used to "change mindsets" in a context where the "culture" of procuring for the cheapest price had led to a "race to the bottom," and so a different way of thinking was needed: "Value does not just mean cost, nor is it something that exists purely in the construction phase of projects. Value needs to consider a broader range of metrics beyond financial. It must also consider wider social, economic and environmental factors—and consider them across the full investment lifecycle" (Construction Innovation Hub n.d.).

The conceptualization of value in these terms subsequently advocates for value profiles established by setting the relative importance of five "value categories" (natural, social, human, manufactured, and financial) that all become commensurable and potentially tradeable. Value as an apparatus was used not only to understand the situation better but also to try to change the way labor and materials were procured, and buildings built. Speaking about "procuring for

value” with me, a partner in an architect practice reflected, “That’s an interesting one, isn’t it? Value. You have social value, physical value, capital value.” Value as a multidimensional concept contained the ability to connect and compare different dimensions of ‘the good,’ and to cast this into the future.

Concepts of value not only offered the promise of solving the construction industry crisis, but also enabled professionals to align the necessity to generate profit, with their moral desire to “make a difference” and “do the right thing.” An executive for a main contractor spoke about the work they did in these terms:

We are trying to introduce as much value as possible, true social value. Job creation, sustainability, developing people’s skills, the life of the project, all sorts. . . Yes, we are a private organization, but this is the primary reason we do what we do. We’re working for the greater good and adding tangible value. . . Being a big player enables us to do the right thing.

The history of deindustrialization was drawn on as part of the motivating force of these projects. For example, a manager, in charge of a framework of many hundreds of millions of pounds, spoke about this in relation to working in the coal industry at the start of his career in the 1980s, the pit closures and the “horrendous decimation” he had observed. The framework was an opportunity to “really create some strength within the North East region, with regional players.” Investing a pound in North East companies meant that it was ploughed back into the North East economy. “So, it just multiplies. So, for all you are thinking, ‘oh, I am putting a pound into the region,’ you are not—you are putting several pounds into the region because that pound then propagates because it is keeping you in a job, [and you are then] keeping somebody else in a job, who is keeping somebody else in a job.” He contrasted this with the narrower cost-based way he used to practice his job: “And I used to. . . go ‘right okay, that is this year’s salary paid for,’ because I had saved forty grand on a project or whatever. . . then I would sort of slap meself and say, ‘that is very narrow. So. . . I can save [names a client on the framework] a pound, but I can generate £20 to the North East economy, right. Okay, bring it on!”

The promise of compatibility between surplus value and social value, and the understanding that the generation of the former could also generate the latter, was made sense within the work experiences of construction industry professionals. During my fieldwork I often heard them express their “love” and “passion” for their work. Being part of major construction projects offered them the satisfaction and

pride of being part of something significant, something that stays standing. "My kids get sick of it," said a senior site manager; "even after all these years, I still point out the buildings I've been part of." The sentiment often expressed was "we are a business, *of course* we need to make a profit"; however, this pursuit of profit alone was not enough. What made work fulfilling was the experience of love, passion, and pride generated from work, but also working on behalf of others. This was often expressed in terms of working to provide for your family, a sentiment that could be extended to community, region or "greater good." As one executive said, "I want my children to be warm, safe, clean, and I am part of a company that delivers that, for children to grow up in, so we are providing that for everyone."

Construction industry interlocutors in their fifties and sixties had started work when shipbuilding and coal mining were still options. A number had "come up through the tools" (worked in the trades and as laborers on site before becoming managers) and had experienced a level of material comfort, security, and career success they had not expected at the start of their careers. This particular experience of labor could be one of feeling 'valued'; as one contracts manager, who had been working for the same national contractor for forty years, told me:

Being part of the company is like being a part of the family. . . . I think you feel valued. It must be awful, you know, to have a shit job. There is a new film that has come out by Ken Loach, did you see it? *'Sorry We Missed You'* it's called. . . . But that is the sort of thing that you can imagine; you know, lots of people, van drivers, being kicked from one thing to another. I have always, I still love the job.

Here then, we can see the way the alignment of different values comes to make sense in a context where work generates an experience of worth, as well as recognizing the experience of 'worthlessness' from 'bad' jobs (Kalb 2016).

Thus value enabled professionals in the construction industry to conceptualize the work they were doing, not only in terms of the economic pursuit of surplus value but also the potential to solve the crisis in their industry and pursue moral projects, helping people who were "less well off" and contributing towards the "greater good" through the creation of social value. Value also offered a way for the framework manager to positively transform the decimation wrought by the closure of the coal mines, and a way for a number of construction professionals quoted in this section to imagine working towards a "better future," one that extended through their personal

kinship to a more extended sense of relationality. From this perspective, the neoliberal transformation in the city and region were not a cause for concern, because they enabled not only a thriving place but also a thriving construction industry, which was then in a position to help others through the creation of social value. These different forms of value were understood to be in alignment—what was good for one, was good for the other.

So far, we have seen value as a linguistic and practical apparatus that both local politicians and construction professionals used to conceptualize different notions of benefit and a particular relationship between them. In these understandings, developing the built environment represented a kind of ‘engine’ to not only generate surplus value but subsequently other kinds of social value that could benefit “those in need” in the region. The industrial history of the North East and the wounds of deindustrialization are drawn upon as a motivation for action, and a basis from which to imagine a better future. On the one hand, we can take these understandings as sincere moral projects that animate people’s involvement in urban development and motivate the work they do, and we can acknowledge the collective histories and the sense of moral responsibility informing these visions. On the other hand, these moral projects do not stand outside of, nor are they opposed to, capitalist processes, but form part of their constitution. In this way, we can recognize the ‘insidious’ ways capital has become the prerequisite for generating common goods in an austere context in which other possibilities for collective action and care have been severely curtailed. In these understandings, surplus value and use value are envisioned in a ‘win-win’ relationship of compatibility whereby the generation of the former can also generate the latter. The contradictions, damages, and risks of the increasing enmeshment of financialized capital with social support and urban life are obscured in favor of often depoliticized understandings of need and “greater good.”

Scales of Value

In this section of the chapter, I shift the scale from the local and regional to the national and global, focusing specifically on universities as part of these processes. Seeking to go beyond “place-bound visions of social process” (Kalb 2020: 23) and capture the non-place specificity of the longer-range relations and apparatus that help constitute these systems, what role can value play in helping to conceptualize this? As David Harvey describes, Marx’s favored definition of

capital was "value in motion," which focuses attention on processes of metamorphosis and circulation (Harvey 2017). Value again can be recognized as a specifying apparatus through which certain relations across different scales can appear, in this case connecting the specific developments in the city and region with national and global processes of capital movement, credit and debt, and changing legislation.

The £750 million committed by the North East universities for capital investment leads us to explore particular relations of value that connect the regulatory and policy-driven changes in UK higher education to debt-leveraged capital investment. Since the 1990s, student numbers have more than doubled, an expansion intensified by changes introduced by the Conservative-led coalition government between 2012 and 2015, which significantly reduced public funding for university teaching, sharply increased tuition fees, and removed the cap on student numbers for English universities¹⁴ (Mulhearn and Franco 2018). These changes were justified according to the express aim of creating a higher education 'market' with competition between universities, including allowing the possibility that some universities could 'fail' (Holmwood 2016; Cronin 2016).¹⁵ Present in these changes, and their justification, was a governmental redefinition of the 'value of education' from its prior conceptualization in terms of a 'social right' and 'public benefits,' to "its contribution to human capital and economic growth in a global knowledge economy" and the "value for money" it provides (Holmwood 2016: 63; Gill 2014; Holmwood and Bhambra 2012).

While the coalition government reduced public funding to universities by 82 percent, the student fees they introduced more than made up for this loss, with students "being debt-leveraged to provide revenue for the university" (Holmwood 2016: 68).¹⁶ Universities are now among the biggest businesses in the UK. As Mark Corver writes:

Undergraduate recruitment alone has turned into a competitive market of the first order, with £20 billion a year of competitive revenue flowing through it in 2019 . . . Many universities now find themselves with fully competitive revenue flows, comparable to some of the UK's largest listed companies. (Corver 2019)

This competition is international to attract a larger pool of students who would also pay higher fees. At the start of 2020, about a third of student fees in UK higher education were from international students (Jack and Smyth 2020).

The need to invest in capital projects and the need to compete appear to have become unquestionably coupled. For example, a

2014 report on the economic impact of capital investment plans to the Russell Group (a self-selected association of twenty-four research universities) stated:

Russell Group universities compete globally for students and staff. In order to continue to attract and retain the best students and staff, it is essential that the universities are able to offer world-class research and learning environments. The capital projects considered in this report will enable them to do this. (BiGGAR Economics 2014: 2)

To fund these capital investment projects, financialized relations of value have been established by university senior management throughout the sector, with £3 billion borrowed by UK universities between 2016 and 2018. Over half of this was ‘privately placed debts’ (Hale 2018a; Connelly 2018), which as Stephen Connelly delineates, exist on the boundary between banking and shadow-banking, partly because of the private nature of the transaction, and partly because the ultimate lenders tend to be non-banks (Connelly 2018). Much of this debt has been directed toward capital development projects, with £2 billion worth of contracts agreed or enacted between universities and contractors for the period 2017–20 (Plimmer and Viña 2016). Thus, not only individual students but higher education institutions are being debt-leveraged in order to fund capital investment projects in the name of competition.

Returning to the local context, we see these forces of value take concrete form. Part-funded by a £100 million loan from the European Investment Bank (EIB, the lending arm of the European Union), Newcastle University has been developing a new campus, The Helix (formerly called Science Central), on the grounds of a former colliery and brewery, fifteen minutes’ walk west of the main city center campus (see Melhuish 2015 for a detailed history of the site). On the finished site, university buildings will sit alongside high-rise apartment and office blocks, an innovation center, food and drink venues, and a hotel. In a news item in the local press announcing, “the largest-ever loan for a university outside London and the South East,” Chris Brink, former vice chancellor of Newcastle University who agreed the loans, was quoted as saying: “For years, I went around boasting that Newcastle University has no debt; until the tide turned, and gradually I didn’t say that as often as I used to because more and more of our council members, board of directors, were pointing out that not having debt and not leveraging what you can get was not such a good idea” (Ford 2016).

The Helix site is being developed in partnership with, and co-funded by, pension fund Legal and General, and Newcastle City Council. As Graham Thrower argues, with pension assets in the largest pension markets such as UK, USA, Australia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands far exceeding GDP, contemporary pension funds are among "a new form of financialized statecraft enacted through and with other forms of institutional capital and other market actors" (Thrower 2018: 266). Some buildings on The Helix will be owned and rented out by Newcastle City Council in the revenue-generating methods described in relation to a different council earlier in this chapter. The Helix thus exemplifies the helical materialization of contemporary forces of urban development: entrepreneurial rent-seeking local government, debt-funded university capital investment projects, and globally operating pension funds and investment banks as local urban players.

With significant debt now the norm across the higher education sector, the use value of education is underpinned and dependent on interest-bearing capital demanding "its pound of flesh in future value production that must continuously rise to cover the compounding costs of interest payments" (Harvey 2017: 149). Value in this case is an apparatus through which relations between pension funds, student loans, and billion-pound higher education debts, tying generations into precarious relations of dependency and indebtedness, can come into view.

Coda

In 2018, during the UK University and College Union's 14-day strike over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension, I started to learn more about how pensions work, and the forces at play to de-risk the USS pension. Being on strike enabled me to have conversations on the picket lines, afforded more time to read blogs and articles written by experts on the subject, and reflect on the issues raised,¹⁷ thus making visible to me a web of interconnected threads. These connections, coupled with the observable transformations of the city that surrounded me, were in part what motivated my interest in education-focused urban development, and my subsequent fieldwork exploring this urban development and the construction that enabled it.

When I learned about the billions of pounds in debt taken on by universities since 2016, I felt the ground under me shift, suddenly

aware that it was made of sand. These debts would need to be serviced, and the ability to do so seemed to rest on assumptions about the future: for example that student numbers will continue to grow, that UK higher education will continue to be a desirable destination for international students and that borrowing costs would stay low. The peril of this gamble was sharply highlighted at the start of the pandemic, when international student numbers for the new academic year were unknown. Universities halted ‘unnecessary spending’ (including capital investment plans, and staff recruitment and promotions). While enrolment was not impacted to the extent expected, the long-term repercussions of a reliance on international student recruitment, as well as post-Brexit government cuts to research, increased borrowing costs and income deficits due to rising costs, have continued to emerge, while redundancies are being fought at a number of universities (Adams 2022; Staton 2021).

Following this thread, more interconnections started to become visible: the changes to higher education legislation, the large debts most of our students had to accumulate in order to gain their degrees, and the huge debts the universities were taking on, primarily to fund capital investment projects. Furthermore, this borrowing was intertwined with the attack on pensions, as Thomas Hale wrote in the *Financial Times*: “Pension liabilities have been driven upwards in part by the same global financial forces that have made bonds so attractive for university financing—lower discount rates, pushed down by interest rates, which increase the present value of future obligations to retirees” (Hale 2018b). And whilst I know this is important, my understanding of it, like with bonds and other financial instruments, feels tentative; it crystallizes briefly, just for that understanding to disperse again, leaving a clear understanding almost, but not quite, in reach. I can recognize the intangibility and complexity as part of the power of contemporary capitalist processes, as well as the challenges these present for understanding and contesting them.

Tracing these threads, we see a particular kind of relatedness—pensions, university debts, and student debts tying together generations in impersonal, mediated relations, through complex, opaque, and hard-to-grasp processes; impersonal transactions that wield such power over people’s lives, their hopes for the future and the comfort (or livability) of old age. Every day that we academics teach students, we participate in this frontline of indebtedness—a financialized value regime of education and the urban.

I write this chapter from a position of entanglement in these very threads. My everyday life at work—meetings about the Research

Excellence Framework, email exchanges with anxious students—are not separate from my scholarship. Rather than imply a critical academic distance, a position of purity born of separation from capital processes from which to speak, I wish to make my position visible. I am entangled with the relations of value examined in this chapter, not only as a researcher but as an employee of a university centrally involved in urban development projects; as the recipient of a new office, part of their major refurbishment schemes; as someone whose job is made more secure by ever-rising student numbers and their rising debts; as a pension-fund contributor (and hopefully future recipient); and as an academic involved in the everyday reproduction of a now financialized value regime of higher education through which values of a particular kind are measured by metric and audit (Burrows 2012; Gill 2014). I am implicated in, deriving privilege from, and helping to reproduce these processes, even as I am critical of them. Recognizing this entangled-ness is also to share a vested interest in the city, region, and urban development processes explored in this chapter.

If we as academics can hold within us intense criticism while still taking part in practices that reproduce that same system, doing the 'best good' in limited circumstances, we should grant that possibility to other people. I am trying to keep in view, as I seek to understand 'insidious capital,' that people are full, complex, and centers of their own historical universe, and not mere neoliberal automatons. Maintaining an anthropological commitment to taking seriously what our interlocutors are telling us does not necessarily mean a shared perspective, or shared terms of critique. As I encountered in my ethnographic research, while there was no lack of concern with the lives and well-being of others, the necessity of profit and the supposedly 'win-win' benefits of financialized urban development were mostly taken for granted, and so my interlocutors had very different ways of conceptualizing what is at stake, and the best way to work on behalf of these others. Taking all of this into account, I continue to consider what would be useful anthropological knowledge in this context that could make a meaningful contribution to change as well as offer both critique and understanding.

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Notes

1. The North East is a meaningful definition of a region of England. Its major city is Newcastle upon Tyne, with a population of just over 260,000 people; it is neighbored by the borough of Gateshead, the two being separated by the River Tyne. To the south, is the small medieval university city of Durham in County Durham, the port city of Sunderland, and the industrial town of Middlesbrough, in the Tees Valley. Apart from Gateshead, all have their own universities.
2. I was an observer in the site office of two large construction projects in different parts of the region, as well as with a local contractor and two architects’ practices, attending a wide range of meetings and accompanying site visits. I also attended a range of other meetings and events, and volunteered in a community cafe in an area particularly affected by these large projects. I conducted interviews with people involved across the development ‘ecosystem’ in the North East, including planning officers, university estates managers, local politicians, framework managers, developers, and a range of construction industry professionals. Because of the identifiability of building projects, and many local actors, in a small and interconnected region, I do not specify locations, projects, or identifiable job titles.
3. Important sources of industry in the rest of the region include ‘branch-plant’ economy, companies with headquarters elsewhere, such as Nissan, and chemical and pharmaceutical production (Nayak 2003; Aldridge 2019).
4. The developer has since gone into administration, with liabilities of £211 million after “some of its high-net-worth funders redeemed their loans in the pandemic” (Whitfield 2022).
5. Completion of this project has been delayed as the main contractor entered into administration in February 2023.
6. Volume house building is also happening throughout the region, particularly in suburban and semirural areas; however, this kind of housebuilding was not the focus of this research project.
7. Newcastle has two large city-center universities (Newcastle University and Northumbria University, with over 50,000 students between them). Durham is an old and prestigious collegiate university, with approximately 20,000 students for a local population of just 43,000, whereas Sunderland and Teesside are post-1992 universities, with almost 17,000 and 30,000 students respectively, and having larger proportions of local students.

8. A major construction framework is an agreement where the clients select main contractors in advance, and this group then competes for individual projects for framework clients.
9. Selling themselves on all-inclusive ease and luxury, purpose-built student accommodation is offering a guaranteed return on income, although there was already growing evidence of over-supply and of failed schemes prior to Covid-19 (Mulhearn and Franco 2018).
10. The Covid-19 pandemic marked the end of this period of austerity, with a huge rise in public spending and borrowing from £55bn in financial year 2019/20, to £355bn in 2020/21 (Pryce 2021). The government said that post-Covid recovery would not mean a return to austerity (Lowe 2020) and commentators were hailing an end to the economic orthodoxy of reducing public spending to deal with economic difficulties (Elliott 2021). However, in Autumn 2022, following government-funded support for energy bills and the response to the then Prime Minister Liz Truss's mini-budget, Conservative politicians began once again signaling a return to austerity. Since then high inflation, increased interest rates and borrowing costs, the related cost of living crisis and the economic impacts of Brexit continue to contribute to economic uncertainty.
11. The North East region is divided into 12 local authorities (otherwise known as councils), each with elected local councillors, and 29 parliamentary constituencies represented by members of parliament in the national government. Although traditionally Labour voting area, in the 2019 general election, 10 of these constituencies voted Conservative (in comparison to only 3 in 2015 and 2017), dismantling the so-called 'red wall' that ran across the industrial heartlands of Northern England (Cutts et al. 2020), part of a long and complex story of political realignment, which includes Brexit (Bhambra 2017; Cutts et al. 2020; Evans 2020).
12. Local authorities have been differently impacted, depending on their reliance on grants from central government, the proportion of population in need of services, and the ability to raise taxes and charges in other ways, while "austerity cuts in local government spending have fallen most heavily on those local areas with greatest need" (Gray and Barford 2018: 550), such as councils in the North East.
13. The current cost of living crisis in the UK, which began in 2021 with sharply increased food and energy costs, has further intensified this crisis.
14. At the same time as student numbers have increased, the percentage of academics on fixed-term contracts has increased. In 2018/19, 34 percent were employed on these contracts (HESA 2019), but this figure excludes those on hourly paid contracts. The University and College Union estimates that these academics are doing between 25 and 30 percent of the teaching in many universities (UCU 2019).
15. Since the late 1990s, responsibility for higher education policy has been increasingly devolved to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, each of which has differing fee regimes, priorities, and emphasis (Brown and Carasso 2013).
16. Students start paying their student loans once they earn over £25,000 a year, paying 9 percent of what they earn over this threshold.
17. Particular thanks to those who write for USS Briefs (www.medium.com/ussbriefs/); Stephen Connelly (<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2018/03/16/being-set-up-to-fail-the-battle-to-save-the-uks-universities-from-speculative-finance/>); Clive Barnett (<https://poptheory.org/2018/03/07/the-performance-of-pensions/>); and the journalism of Thomas Hale in the *Financial Times* (e.g., <https://www.ft.com/content/ec403623-7fc9-45a7-89ef-03b681865adb>, <https://www.ft.com/content/4e526e78-44cd-3014-b3ab-b13672523e4e>).

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LABOR, VALUE, AND FRONTLINES IN READING AND BERKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, UNITED STATES

Sharryn Kasmir



The minimum wage in the US state of Pennsylvania has not been raised since 2009. The mandated hourly rate remains at the federal minimum of US\$7.25, while neighboring states have legislated graduated increases to US\$15. Pennsylvania is a fount of cheap labor, in a larger political-economic context that has produced a historic cheapening of labor in the United States relative to the global stage. The strategies of racism and anti-immigrant xenophobia have been central to that outcome. Living conditions for working people have been degraded still further by the neoliberal plundering of city, state, and federal budgets, which slashed public spending and gutted the social safety net. In these circumstances, demands for wages, immigrant rights, racial justice, and state support address many, varied instances of exploitation, dispossession, and extraction. Analyses that cleave off wage demands from social reproduction and justice struggles, therefore, do little to illuminate the politics of the day. For this reason, we need to pay close attention to their multilayered interconnections and their diverse claims on surplus value (e.g., Collins 2017; Harvey 2013, 2081a; Kalb and Mollona 2018; Mullings 2009; Smith 2014; Susser 2012, 2018, 2021).

Bond, Desai, and Ngwane (2013) forge such an approach in their study of South African social movements. Their investigation begins with the extremely differentiated national economy: manufacturing is in decline; finance, construction, and commerce are booming;

and large swaths of the country seem peripheral to the interests of domestic and international capital alike. Reflecting these circumstances, a wellspring of union strikes and community service protests since the 1990s have remained geographically and politically isolated from each other, and they have failed to cohere as a mass movement. While this uneven set of social relations is necessarily the starting point of left politics, it cannot be the end point. Urgently required is a Marxist theory that attends to those contradictions and that “heightens and encapsulates several otherwise familiar tensions—urban/rural; worker/poor; local/national/global; society/nature; gender; and so on—and can show, therefore, perhaps more clearly than in other contexts *the essential relations among them*” (Bond, Desai, Ngwane 2103: 236, emphasis added).

The concept of “essential relations among them” is useful, as it directs us to trace how assorted constituencies and campaigns—for housing, citizenship, health care, and living wages—are connected to each other through their distinct but shared relations to different moments of the capitalist value circuit, to the “real subsumption of not only labour processes but many aspects of daily life under the power of capital in its various forms” (Harvey 2018a: 452; also 2018b). When those connections are not articulated in struggle or brought about on the ground, they stand, offstage, as possibilities for unity. When they are pronounced, they may help to assemble a broader, anticapitalist politics. Scholarship that engages those essential relations can sharpen our study of social movements. Essential relations encourages questions in situations of social change: What hidden relations are being exposed? What can be seen, talked about, abstracted, and theorized at this particular conjuncture? What tactics, alliances, organizational forms, and theoretical interventions can be built and imagined in such changing circumstances?

Class defined as an already accomplished structure does not suffice for this inquiry. Rather, we need an account that conceptualizes people in motion and in changing relationships to capital, the state, and each other. Marxian anthropologists have developed a relational, historical framework to revisit the problem of studying working classes under the conditions of twenty-first-century capitalism. The transformations in social relations that make up ‘class in itself’ press us to consider how oppression, devaluation, and extraction operate alongside and in conjunction with exploitation (Harvey 2018a, 2018b; Kalb 2022). If orthodox Marxism focused too narrowly on wage exploitation at the point of production, at the expense of registering other moments of value, then the realities of daily life in our field-

work settings, and the fundamental insights of feminist social reproduction theory set us on a better course (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2012; Gimenez 2018; Vogel [1983] 2013). Anthropologists documented the range of social relationships—waged and unwaged; visible and invisible; free and unfree; debt, rent and consumption—that make up actually-existing capitalism and actually-existing classes. We also sharpened our political tools to better apprehend ‘class for itself.’ Organization and disorganization, struggle and quietude, and alliance and differentiation came to the fore of our research on working classes.¹ In the process, we relearned E.P. Thompson’s indispensable lesson that class is made “in the medium of time—that is, action and reaction, change and conflict” (Thompson 1965: 357.)

The notion of ‘frontlines of value’ (De Angelis 2007, 2016; Kalb this volume) helps deepen this examination of class. Frontlines refers to moments when oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and devaluation clash against the requirements for social reproduction. It points to these antagonisms and to the assorted struggles that give them expression. When we consider each of the constituent concepts—labor, value, frontlines—we quickly recall that the power of capitalists to extract and realize value confronts the countervailing power of laborers to band together to command enough of the surplus to meet their socially determined needs (Lebowitz 2003). Those needs include livelihood, housing, health care, and education, as well as family and community relationships, and individual and collective aspirations for the future.

These changing needs of real people in concrete contexts of ‘living labor’ are often articulated as values, expressed in saturated cultural terms. ‘Values talk’ therefore makes an appearance in many ways in social movements. This fact might seem to confirm a culturalist position, wherein values are conceptualized as ontology, or as “the constitutive idea that drives the emergence of any self-identifying human group/society/culture” (Kalb, this volume.) This version of values defines groups of people; it makes them distinct from others and “brings universes into being” (Graeber 2013: 231; also Graeber 2004). But this reading of values as essence repeats the mistakes of the bounded culture concept that describes difference without explaining the larger processes that produce social and cultural worlds (Wolf 1982; also Gill and Kasmir 2016; Kalb 2018; Kasmir and Gill 2018). It forecloses the necessary work of tracing the relations among expressions of values or ethics, and therefore “opposes the idea that the world is a structured and meaningful articulation of connected ongoing relations that can be stabilized

through analysis and in theory, as a premise for acting upon it” (Narotzky 2016a: 278).

We gain better purchase on those connections if we return to Marx’s concept of value, albeit with a critical frame that puts labor at the center of analysis. In this way, we see labor as more than just a source of capital’s valorization, but also its negation via struggles for social reproduction. “In capitalism as a whole, the two-sided totality, capital does not merely seek the realization of its own goal, valorization; it also must seek to suspend the realization of the goals of wage-labour” (Lebowitz 2003: 122). Laborers capture a greater share of surplus value through organization and struggle. But division and separation of labor is an inner tendency of capital. As Silvia Federici (2004) aptly phrased it, the accumulation of capital *is* the accumulation of difference. Therefore, banding together or solidarity among laborers is the counterweight to surplus in the hands of capital, and must be at the heart of any investigation of value.

To advance this line of thought it is important to apprehend the politics of labor. The idea of labor as a political entity first recognizes the myriad ways of getting a living beyond the wage. It then refers to the power-laden processes of categorizing, differentiating, or unifying those laborers, and, further, is points to the “social protests and quietude, organizations, and cultures [that] reflect multiple engagements with capital and state as well as other [laborers] locally, regionally and globally” (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014: 7). In this view, divisions of labor (in the plural) are the political face of the technical or structural division of labor (in the singular). A close examination of the dynamic, dialectical relationship of its two faces makes plain that the social division of labor is never purely technical or economic but is always a historical outcome of impulses for unification or differentiation, both from above and below.

The result of these ongoing processes is not the actualization of class as a fixed structure but a historically situated arrangement of exploitation, dispossession, and extraction between capital and its combined workers, dependents, and debt payers. This arrangement is made by the politics of the day: “Instead of a doctrinaire assertion of class analyses developed in earlier historical periods, the task . . . is to meaningfully theorize the emergent class formations and modes of struggle that define our age . . . the intellectual and political task of renewing the concept of class immanently, by reworking it in and through the struggles of our age” (McNally 2013: 402; also Kalb and Mollona 2018). Don Kalb underscores the point: class is made *in* struggle, it “does not emerge from a position. It emerges from

struggle” (Kalb 2015: 16). By this definition, classes are relational. They are made within larger fields of power that condition the totality of social reproduction, including the wage, and that gives shape to culturally inflected conflicts.

Fieldwork in the US Rust Belt

To address these concerns meaningfully, it is important to consider articulations of labor, value, and frontlines in particular locations. In what follows, I draw on my fieldwork (2018–21) in the majority Latinx (gender-neutral term for Latinos/as) rust-belt city of Reading, Pennsylvania, and the majority white, non-Latinx suburbs of Reading, and the rural towns of Berks County that surround the city. My research took place during a distinct conjuncture for oppositional, left-oriented politics in the United States. The timeframe was bracketed by the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the unfolding crises of 2020–21, including the Coronavirus pandemic, state-led and xenophobic assaults on immigrants, a racial justice uprising catalyzed by the police killings of African Americans, and the national election and subsequent white nationalist insurrection (Kasmir 2020, 2021).

During this period, I carried out participant observation (in person, online, and again in person, as the pandemic dictated) among three social movement groups: Make the Road Reading advances immigrant and workers’ rights; Sunrise Movement Berks is a youth climate justice organization that advocates the Green New Deal; and Berks Stands Up builds political and democratic engagement in the electoral arena. Each is a branch of a national– or state-level organization involved in wider coalitions that provide training and that coordinate campaigns for their affiliates. Their professional staff pursue issue-oriented agendas in the state and national arena. The three local groups are at the heart of a growing left/liberal ecosystem in Reading/Berks that also includes cultural and education associations, legal advocates, and community initiatives. I followed their protests, organizing strategies, and alliance as they responded to urgent national developments, built their power, and made claims on surplus value.

The groups achieved modest but notable advances in a region where decades of deindustrialization deepened divisions between the city and the surrounding county. Trump’s right-wing, authoritarian populism fueled racism and encouraged anti-immigrant and anti-urban reflexes in the area, where white hate groups had gained ground decades earlier. However, opposition to Trump’s presidency



Figure 9.1. Inner city of Reading. © Sharryn Kasmir

also fostered new progressive organizing. In solidly Republican Berks County, the three groups contributed to defeating Donald Trump in 2020 in the battleground state of Pennsylvania. For its importance to the national outcome, the editor of *The Nation* spent election day in Reading. Writing before the results were known, when it seemed the election might hinge on Pennsylvania, he wrote of the social move-

ment trio, “Let the record show that if Joe Biden wins here, he was carried to victory on [their] backs” (Guttenplan 2020). In what follows, I introduce the Reading/Berks region and the groups Make the Road, Sunrise Berks, and Berks Stands Up. Then I discuss the hard work of organizing that broadened the progressive field, and I show how their alliance moved the groups toward more radical positions on race, capitalism, and class. I identify moments when their actions revealed hidden relations among diverse populations and changed what could be seen, talked about, and imagined.

Uneven Development in Reading/Berks

Reading (population 95,844) is a city of row houses, brick factories, and railroad crossings left behind by the once-dominant Reading Railroad conglomerate. Many factory buildings are abandoned, yet some still house manufacturing. Nearly one-third of Reading’s population lives in poverty, triple the rate for Berks County as a whole. Despite repeated attempts to revitalize the central business district, including the recent expansion of a local college into a downtown office building, large storefronts on the main business corridor are vacant. Meanwhile corner shops, restaurants, bodegas, and other small businesses testify to the fact that immigrants vitalize the city’s commercial life. Uneven investment and disinvestment, divisions of labor, and state policy have intensified disparities between Reading and Berks over decades.

Reading is a majority Latinx city (officially 67 percent, 2020 census), with a significant foreign-born population (18.6 percent). A minority of the population identifies as white alone, non-Latinx (20.4 percent). The African American/Black alone community, dating largely to the city’s industrial expansion in the nineteenth century and the post-World War I Great Migration from the South, is comparatively small (13.3 percent). Puerto Ricans came to Reading for jobs in industry and agriculture after Operation Bootstrap (1947), and migrants from Dominican Republic, Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Central America began to arrive in the 1980s, as they were displaced by the growth of export processing zones, free trade agreements, and civil wars in their home countries. Some sought affordable housing in low-cost Reading after they were priced out of working-class neighborhoods in gentrifying New York City (130 miles away); others came directly to join relatives in an increasingly Spanish-speaking city (Reisinger 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

Reading is ringed by working-class and middle-income suburbs, and a few miles beyond are farms and rural towns. Berks County (population 428,849) is majority white alone, non-Latinx (68.7 percent). Reading reliably votes Democrat, while surrounding areas are strongly Republican and supported Donald Trump in 2016 (typically more so with greater distance from the city). This political demarcation manifests the demographic, economic, and social divergence of urban, suburban, and rural Berks over the course of the twentieth century.

Reading had been a stronghold of the Socialist Party of America from the 1920s through the 1940s, and an organized working class commanded power across space. Today area activists remember little of its achievements. Reading Socialists won the mayoralty three times from 1927 to 1944, and they took city council seats to comprise a majority in city government. At the time, Socialist parties in the United States, Europe, and Australia had municipalist wings that fought for local-level power through home rule and charter reform. The strategy emerged from the experiences of late nineteenth-century urbanization and industrialization. Reading was home to the Reading Railroad, Berkshire hosiery mills, cigar-making shops, dozens of metal and textile factories, hotels, and stores, and it was home to German-descended and Pennsylvania Dutch migrants from nearby farms. New class configurations and life conditions in the city shaped a novel political response: “If onerous working conditions precipitated new forms of labor organization, the conditions of daily living also produced new forms of urban politics” (Stromquist 2011: 311; also 2009). The Socialist Party grew within these changing circumstances.

The Reading party was closely tied to the craft unions and to the city’s majority German-descended population. Its electoral success rested upon thorough-going, ward-level organizing. Socialists nurtured a political and cultural network that linked city and county, and they held public office in boroughs throughout the county. Reading’s Socialists disbanded in 1962, having weathered decades of declining membership after a series of blows: the national party split in 1936, and the New Deal won working-class voters to the Democratic Party (1930s–1940s); World War II further diminished support; and the Cold War forcefully repressed left organizations (Fones-Wolf 2000; Gavigan 2021; Hendrickson 1972, 1973; Kennedy 1979; Pratt 1970, 1975; Stetler 1974).

Importantly, however, while party records listed members among the Polish and Italian migrants to the city in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, there is little indication that Reading Socialists organized African Americans. This failure mirrored capitalist divisions of labor in Berks. Black people were less likely to be employed in the industries and shops where craft unions and socialism took hold, most notably cigar making and other skilled trades. Socialists at the national level were likewise slow to organize Black workers and to fight for all laborers and “all work throughout the world” (Du Bois [1920] 1969: 102). In another context, W.E.B. Du Bois warned in 1920 of the failure of Socialists to organize Black workers and to struggle for all laborers. Du Bois foresaw that the fight to curb capitalists’ profits and to increase wages would be won only for white men. That is, the realization of the struggle of laborers for their socially determined needs (material, social, cultural, and ethical) or their part of surplus value, turned on the question of whose labor was counted in and whose was not. The on-the-ground politics that produced those relationships of solidarity and division were in Du Bois’ field of vision.

Racial inequality was the groundwork for the diverging trajectories of Reading and its surrounding environs over the twentieth century, and the legacy leaves its mark to the current day (as I discuss below). No other social movement emerged in the region that commanded the power that Socialists did, and left opposition in Reading/Berks diminished in the wake of its decline. The city’s population reached a peak of 110,000 in 1930, after which capital flight, first of heavy industry and then of textiles, eroded the industrial base. The seesaw of investment and disinvestment reshaped geographical space and disarticulated linkages among working people and between them and wider fields of power, while the construction of highways after World War II drew industry and population out of the urban center to newly built suburbs.

Disinvestment and the cheapening of labor beset Reading’s neighborhoods, and particularly the small African American community. In fact, across the United States, capital flight impacted Black workers earlier and harder than it did whites (Robotham 2020). Sectors of the city’s population that might otherwise have been politically active were consequently disempowered, and the disparate impact of deindustrialization, structural racism, and white supremacy had the effect of moderating Civil Rights organizing in the 1960s and 1970s (Penn State Berks, n.d. a, b).

Latinx migrants came to Reading during a period of economic decline. The population fell to a low of 78,000 in 1980, and those who remained in the city earned lower wages and were less likely to work

in unionized workplaces than those who resided in the suburbs. The suspension of the railroad passenger service in 1981 further widened the gulf between city and county. Capital flight was acute after the passage of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in the 1990s, when a succession of large industrial employers shut their doors. Setbacks, plant closures, and punishing defeats beleaguered organized labor, and the United Steel Workers and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers were hard hit. Today, shop-based organizing is an uphill battle, and major private employers are non-union. Workplaces are dispersed, immigrant workers are uniquely vulnerable, and unions are on the defensive.

While Berks County overall was transformed by capital abandonment, decline cut an irregular path. Rural land has been rezoned and sold to speculators who invest in million-square-foot warehouses for lease to massive e-commerce corporations. In turn, the city lost its tax base, and the federal government cut funding and devolved fiscal responsibility to cash-strapped municipalities. The political-economic result was a deindustrialized, financially distressed 'disempowered city' (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018). Following the neoliberal playbook, revenue sharing and tax redistribution were political non-starters, and urban space was devalued relative to the suburbs (Tabb 2015). As a result, Reading declared financial exigency in 2009 and submitted to state oversight. Upon its exit from the program for fiscally distressed municipalities thirteen years later, the state-appointed manager reflected: "Distressed status had a major impact on every resident and business in the city . . . It constrained vital social, civic and safety services, and investments in infrastructure, parks and development . . . and inhibited the city's ability to combat poverty and provide affordable housing" (Lynch 2022).

The circumstances of "racialized disinvestment, the splintered political geography of suburban exclusion and regional inequality" (Kirkpatrick and Smith 2015: 3; also Peck 2013, 2014) widened demographic, economic, and political cleavages across Berks. Hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nation, and the National Socialist movement, leafleted and recruited in the county in the 1980s and 1990s (Penn State Berks n.d. b). After Barack Obama's election in 2008, the right-wing Tea Party gained a foothold in Berks. Membership in the Tea Party-affiliated Berks Patriots has declined in the years since, but members and sympathizers rallied for Donald Trump and Mike Pence during their 2020 campaign stops in the area, and some county residents went to Washington DC on 6 January to subvert the election of President Biden. Trump's right-wing populism fueled racism and

anti-immigrant and anti-urban reflexes in this setting. However, it also sparked left/liberal organizing.

An Emerging Left/Liberal Alignment in Reading/Berks

After the election of Donald Trump, sectors of the US Left turned their energies to the electoral arena. The 2016 campaign of Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders had become a channel for a radical reformist position that held that contesting power in the two-party system was both necessary and possible (Smucker 2020). Working in the context of historically low interest rates, these progressive actors promoted an intellectual and policy framework that aimed to make the federal government a more active agent of redistribution, and they mounted a case in favor of deficit spending and fiscal stimulus (Kelton 2020). National groups agitated from the ‘outside’ by mobilizing their local affiliates, while allied progressive elected officials worked the ‘inside’ of legislative bodies. At the same time, Black Lives Matter (BLM) grew its network and joined with other racial justice organizations in the broad-based Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). The movement focused on state violence, mass incarceration, and police killings of Black people, tracing those forms of violence and oppression to the history of slavery and racialized capitalism (Kelley 2017, 2021). Their call to defund or abolish the police issued a mandate to shift public spending away from policing and jails and toward improving living conditions in Black, Brown, and poor communities. Gender and LGBTQIA+ equality, raising the minimum wage, environmental justice, erasing student debt, granting immigrant rights, and supporting unions were likewise on the agenda (Ransby 2018; M4BL). The intersecting crises of 2020—the deadly failure of the federal government to coordinate a response to the pandemic; mass joblessness; racial disparity laid bare; and widespread protests sparked by the police murder of an African American man George Floyd²— in conjunction with the low cost of borrowing, strengthened the position of progressives to pursue social justice through government redistribution and deficit-spending.

The ‘inside–outside strategy’ came to fruition in 2021, after Democrats achieved a majority in Congress, and Biden won the presidency. Social movement actors who helped deliver the victory then pressed for a ‘new New Deal.’ Demands for public investment also offered a fix to the seeming ‘twilight’ of the neoliberal regime of accumulation (Maskovsky and Bork-James 2019) and to China’s mounting

economic force and the power of its state purse, as evidenced by the Belt and Road Initiative. These facts augured the decline of US hegemony on the world stage. Government spending was one potential remedy. While stimulus packages and an infrastructure plan were being formulated in Washington, advocates wrangled over how much could be wrested from capital and the state, and in what form (tax the rich, basic income, jobs programs, medical care, state-funded higher education, higher wages, etc.). On the ground, in places like Reading/Berks, the pressing calculations were: Who will be counted in and who will be counted out of the fought-for spending programs? Whose labor will be valued and whose will go unrecognized?

These questions evoked a race and gender critique of the 1930s New Deal. During New Deal negotiations, broadly distributive policies were enclosed by a compromise with Southern legislators and agricultural interests. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act exempted tipped, domestic, and farm work from minimum wage regulations, overtime pay, social security, and other labor protections. This maneuver brought the legacies of slavery, share-cropping, and Black women's domestic service squarely into the New Deal. The expansion of the Keynesian state after WWII further accrued benefit to white male workers. The state thereby inscribed a structurally unequal and politically fragmented US working class (Baca 2004, 2017; Coates 2014; Katznelson 2013; Mullings 1986).

Struggles over categorization of labor, visibility, and inclusion were underway in 2020–21. Left theorists and activists in the United States were increasingly mindful of the ways the New Deal underwrote white male privilege. Backers of the Green New Deal made the case that federal investment in green jobs, infrastructure, and the care economy must undo those historic injustices as an urgent priority, beginning in working-class communities impacted by environmental racism. BLM and M4BL showed how New Deal and Keynesian policies widened the widening racial wealth gap. These national conversations seeded the local organizing of Make the Road Reading, Berks Stands Up, and Sunrise Movement Berks.

Make the Road Reading was established in 2014 to serve immigrant and multiracial working people, both documented and undocumented. Its non-profit parent organization began in 1996 in New York City, and there are currently chapters in five states and twelve cities that promote immigrant rights, a US\$15 per hour minimum wage, and building power in Latinx and working-class communities. Make the Road's affiliation with the Center for Popular Democracy ties it to fifty progressive groups nationwide and to national-scale

strategies. Make the Road employs professional organizers and has hundreds of members in Reading (not all are equally active) who participate via a committee structure. Discussions at weekly meetings of the *comite de lucha*, of which I was a member, centered on Trump's punitive immigration policies and the material conditions of life in a distressed city. The Reading chapter has been an effective player in local political races, including the 2019 election of the city's first Latinx mayor. It attempted a workers' committee in 2019 and had some initial success in area mushroom farms. However, the undertaking faced formidable obstacles, as workplaces were dispersed, operations were subcontracted, and workers' distinct immigration and citizenship statuses meant they faced different vulnerabilities. Make the Road Reading conceded the effort.

Indivisible Berks was founded in 2016, in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election. Democratic congressional staffers took a lesson from the right-wing, populist Tea Party that had undertaken grassroots organizing in reaction to Barack Obama's election. Democrats assembled their own playbook for taking back power in Washington DC. Following the 'Indivisible Guide' for state and local action, groups swiftly formed across the country. These were decentralized volunteer chapters, loosely tied to the national parent, and most were started by women (Greenberg and Levin 2019; Gose and Skocpol n.d.).

Two white women from Berks' suburbs formed a county chapter. Its members were mostly (but not exclusively) white, suburban, and middle-income. While officially independent of party affiliation, in practice Indivisible Berks endorsed select Democrats in county and state races. They chose candidates who defended the Affordable Care Act, and they determined to hold officials accountable on a growing list of issues. Looking ahead to the national election, the group left the Indivisible network and joined the statewide Pennsylvania Stands Up in 2020 to become Berks Stands Up. Over one thousand Facebook followers comprise their extended constituency, and several dozen dues-paying members form a more active core.

Sunrise Movement is a national non-profit organization founded in 2017 that promotes the Green New Deal resolution for government spending on renewable energy, green infrastructure, and union jobs. The youth-driven organization used confrontational tactics (i.e., sit-ins in offices of elected Democrat officials) and quickly gained influence in Washington DC. The Berks hub (chapter) launched with a celebration at Make the Road's large downtown headquarters, and a founder of Indivisible Berks made a speech to welcome the new group to the orbit of the Reading/Berks resistance. Sunrise is the

smallest of the three groups; the hub has a fluctuating but dedicated nucleus of ten to twenty multiracial young people, some of whom identify as gender nonbinary. They foresee that Reading's poor residents on the frontlines of disinvestment and environmental degradation would be well served by substantial federal investment.

Creating and sustaining an alliance among these organizations is a difficult undertaking. In the following sections, I discuss the work of building their base, and combining diverse people and struggles.

Manifold Labors: Labor as a Political Formation

Reading's International Workers' Day 2021 was planned by Make the Road, with the collaboration of Berks Stands Up and Sunrise Berks. It began outside Make the Road's downtown office, and participants marched to City Park, where speakers from social movement groups, unions, and local government took the stage. The central themes echoed the inside-outside strategy of their state and national parent organizations: US\$15 an hour minimum wage; congressional passage of the union-backed PRO Act to remove hurdles to union organizing; and citizenship for undocumented 'essential workers.'

The march also turned on the question of whose labor would be legitimated by the state, and whose would not. Undocumented workers and those without a social security number were ineligible for the stimulus checks and unemployment benefits provided in the Trump administration's pandemic stimulus bills. The subsequent Biden recovery act went partway to extending unemployment allowances, but millions of immigrant workers were still cut out of state support. This omission resulted in terrible outcomes in Reading. Essential workers reported to work, even under dangerous conditions, in order to maintain their household income. Covid outbreaks and two deaths in area poultry plants where several Make the Road members were employed confirmed the deadly risks of their precarity. Meanwhile, those who lost paid work during the pandemic shutdown were rapidly immiserated, unable to cover their rent or afford adequate food. Charitable and volunteer groups stepped in to deliver groceries and offer financial support, and Make the Road Reading, Sunrise Berks, and Berks Stands Up formed a new initiative, Berks Mutual Aid, for that purpose. In this situation, challenging the divisions of labor—that is, confronting the accumulation of difference between documented and undocumented, visible and invisible work—was an urgent matter of life and death.

Make the Road and other labor activists appropriated the state-designated classification 'essential workers' to affirm that far from 'disposable' or 'surplus,' terms often used to denigrate them, farm workers, meat processors, food preparers, and caretakers were the core of the national economy; they were worthy and they created value. Advocates turned the state-issued, Janus-faced category essential, which disproportionately exposed Black, Brown, and immigrant workers to sickness and death, into a claim for wages, recognition, and citizenship rights.

The very fact that International Workers' Day was revived in Reading was itself a noteworthy accomplishment. The holiday was invigorated in the United States in 2006 when immigrant rights groups staged a national Day Without Immigrants. That action was the outcome of more than ten years of organizing (Fine 2006; Striffler 2014), and it took another decade to bring the protest to Reading.

Make the Road reinvented Reading's May Day in 2017 after the holiday had not been celebrated there since Socialists led the festivities in the early to mid-twentieth century. May 1st had long been edged out by the more domesticated Labor Day, a national commemoration of the accomplishments of US unions. The annual Labor Day parade had been the county's major union ritual for decades, but it was suspended in 2015 because neither the financially distressed city nor the United Labor Council could shoulder the US\$15,000 price tag. The parade was again cancelled in 2016 for lack of funds (VanAllen 2016). It was therefore symbolically redolent that May Day was initiated the following year by the recently launched immigrant rights group. Underscoring the changing landscape of labor's institutions and rituals, the event put immigrants at the center of working-class demands, and Make the Road announced itself to be a new social movement actor.

Reading's May Day was an effort to bring together different factions of the community, a tough fight anywhere, and especially so in a region where the history of uneven investment and capital abandonment created deep-seated divisions. Over a hundred local businesses pledged to close for the day, and hundreds of people stayed out of work and marched to oppose the encroachment of federal immigration enforcement in Berks. Months into his presidency, Trump issued an executive order to expand federal funding for the 287(g) initiative, which partnered state and local police with agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Immigration raids had already resulted in arrests and deportations in Reading, when the county commissioners and sheriff considered applying for

the 287(g) program. The protest helped stall the proposal, and Berks County never applied for the federal monies.

After hosting a smaller event in 2018, Make the Road Reading prepared for another May Day in 2019. For weeks, organizers visited immigrant and Latinx owners of bodegas, restaurants, and nail salons, and asked them to shut in solidarity. Some had participated in 2017 and readily agreed, while others were unfamiliar with the event, and more discussion was required to secure their commitment. I went to dozens of locations with a staff person to seek their collaboration. In one grocery, the organizer asked the Dominican mother and daughter proprietors to support the *huelga*, using the Spanish word for strike to describe the day's purpose. The organizer, also from Dominican Republic, continued in Spanish, "Well, it is not a *huelga* like we know. It's more like a *protest*." This would not be a work stoppage or general strike, the kind of actions the women would be familiar with from International Workers' Day in Dominican Republic, but a more modest march. The mother and daughter were sympathetic. They agreed that Pennsylvania's US\$7.25 wage, doggedly guarded by the Republican-dominated state legislator, was too low, and that Latinx residents had little power in the city. They displayed the Make the Road poster in the shop's front window, and promised to shut on May 1st. A total of 153 businesses did the same.

On the day, approximately a hundred protestors gathered at the Make the Road locale. Members flanked a large 'Fight for \$15' banner, and led the march. They were joined by shop owners, middle-class members of Indivisible Berks, and Sunrise Berks activists who carried signs demanding the closure of the Berks detention center, where ICE contracted with the county to hold immigrant families at US\$200 per day per bed. Although organized labor was not the driving force of the proceedings, the president of the Berks United Labor Council and two representatives of the health care union Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spoke for unions. By contrast, the historic industrial unions United Steel Workers (USW) and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were not in attendance, a fact that evinced their loss of membership and the hollowing out of heavy industry in Berks.

Their absence also testified to meaningful social cleavages. USW and IBEW members are mostly white and male, and reside outside of the city. The United Labor Council president told me that they would not think of joining the protest. They saw Make the Road as 'radicals,' and they avoided visiting Reading, except to attend sports events, use county offices, or (in past years) participate in the Labor

Day parade. The reinvented May Day therefore had the unintended effect of reinscribing difference between city and county, immigrant and native-born workers, social movement groups and labor unions.

Notwithstanding, the Labor Council president's attendance sent an important message. It signaled his readiness to embrace new local actors and to keep the door open for sectors of organized labor to join in the changing left-oriented alliance. There were other engrams of unions on May 1st, as well. Some Sunrise members come from homes where union membership has been etched in family history and identification. The grandfather of one was an IBEW member; another's father lost his job when Ronald Reagan fired and permanently replaced striking air traffic controllers in 1981, an act that dealt a decisive blow to the union movement and issued a neoliberal salvo. Many Make the Road members from Dominican Republic had lived through the wave of industrial actions and general strikes in their home country in the late 1980s, and they brought their experiences in clubs and unions to this new context in Pennsylvania. In addition, the 'Fight for \$15' community-labor campaign was formulated by a national coalition of unions and social movement groups, including SEIU and the Movement for Black Lives.³

If May Day revealed social divides between city and suburbs, unprotected and union workers, native born and immigrant, it also evinced the possibility for coherence. A Make the Road director observed that small-shop owners who joined the march, "don't do better than workers who sell their labor in a traditional way" (Richman 2017). If only fleetingly, May 1st actions enunciated a relationship between immigrant rights and the needs, anxieties, and grievances of a heterogeneous group of protestors, including middle-class suburbanites worried about health insurance and medical costs (Indivisible); immigrant shop owners and undocumented workers (Make the Road); and precariously employed, student-debt-incumbered young people (Sunrise).

To be sure, the form the protest took exposed the structural impediments to workplace organizing. The Make the Road staffer recognized this reality in the grocery, when she contrasted the Reading march with the instrument of the general strike that the mother and daughter proprietors would recall from Dominican Republic. The collection of non-profits, volunteer groups, and union representatives in Reading/Berks did not have the capacity to stage a mass walkout; such militant action would have required a greater degree of power and unity than had been achieved. Nonetheless, Make the Road revitalized an international working-class holiday, mobilized

a diverse collective, and instituted an annual ritual for the growing alliance in Berks.

Values Talk

Immediately upon her return from the Women's March in Washington DC, the first mass protest against the Trump administration, a founder of Indivisible Berks posted on Facebook and called her friends and neighbors to action. She was promptly contacted by an acquaintance who was likewise shocked by Trump's sexism, racism, and anti-immigrant xenophobia, and afraid that his authoritarian nationalism threatened democracy in the United States. Both women had been active in Berks Democrats, but they now considered that Party an ineffective vehicle for the kind of grassroots organizing that would be needed to confront the right-wing agenda in majority-Republican Berks County. Attesting to the fact that their skepticism of the Democrats was widely shared, Indivisible chapters appeared across the country in short order.

Indivisible Berks' first effort was a 'listening canvass.' Volunteers, who were mostly white, suburban, and middle-income, spent weekends in 2018 and 2019 knocking on doors in select boroughs with slim electoral margins and that they deemed swayable. At their neighbors' homes, they asked: "How can government make your life better?" The question was meant to initiate nonpartisan conversations about representative democracy and the role of government in securing their well-being. If this opening was measured and cautious, it also registered a challenge to the reigning neoliberal common sense in favor of small government and against public spending, a message the Berks Patriots had doubled down on in the preceding decade. In addition, the invitation to envision government social support went against Trump policies that handed tax cuts to the rich and threatened to repeal the Obama administration's Affordable Health Care Act.

Canvassers hoped to engage voters whose own vulnerability was exacerbated by these dispossessive policies. Indivisible learned that affordable health care, the price of prescription drugs, and the defense of public services were big-tent issues that appealed to disparate segments of their suburban and rural turf. It was therefore both tactical and heartfelt when the organization drove a months-long campaign to defeat a plan to privatize the county-owned, unionized nursing home. Indivisible's reputation as a formidable local actor was cemented when the county commissioners backed down and signed

contracts that kept the nursing home in public hands and preserved union jobs.

Indivisible's two founders supported redistributive policies akin to New Deal and post-WWII Keynesian protections. Clearly recognizable in their worldview is the 'double movement' involving processes of marketization and the countervailing struggle for social cover (Polanyi 1944). In their own words, the women saw themselves as working to "defeat the Trump agenda, elect leaders who share our values, and realize bold policies." It is worthwhile to examine the rhetorical work being done by the dense, polysemic phrase 'share our values.' They used this expression to voice critique and redraw the familiar (and tired, in their view) political map. They avoided the terms 'left' and 'right' to characterize policy or to chart the political field, and were wary of the descriptor 'progressive' for their organization. They maintained that a new political vocabulary was necessary to reach a broad constituency in their highly partisan county. Instead of those well-worn political identifiers, they believed that 'those who share our values' summoned a more expansive imagined, ethical community; it hailed an anticipated political subject, whom Invisible hoped to engage. This hoped-for assembly would be sufficiently large to swing elections and to assert power over public officials, and it might shift the moral compass toward re-embedding the market and a new social compact.

Importantly, however, 'shared values' envisaged a consensus that sidestepped histories of uneven capitalist processes in Berks. It wished away racial and citizen-based inequality and divisions of labor more than it confronted the contradictions that a large-tent would inevitably bring to the fore. In so doing, it thwarted the difficult work of uncovering the essential relations among different populations. Susana Narotzky made a similar observation regarding the 2011 anti-austerity mobilizations in Spain. Under the banners of 'dignity' and 'justice,' demonstrators issued moral claims about people's worth—that they deserved food, work, and social welfare to provide a dignified life. Yet those slogans did not contest the class inequality or capitalist property relations that undergirded the widespread production of precarity and indignity in Spain (Narotzky 2016b). In Reading/Berks, values talk likewise evaded questions of race, class, and the intertwined processes of capitalist exploitation, dispossession, and oppression. However, the ensuing conjunctural crises of 2020–21 changed what could be seen, talked about, and imagined. Some of Indivisible's executive board members strained against those developments in the lead up to the national election

and after the police murder of George Floyd, while others steered a more radical course.

Gearing up for the 2020 election, Indivisible Berks' leadership made the tactical decision to leave the national's moderate and decentralized orbit and to join forces with the more left-leaning and strategically honed Pennsylvania Stands Up. In so doing, they hoped to benefit from the institutional strength, expertise, and resources of the statewide coalition. The coalition was associated with the Bernie Sanders' camp and was committed to a social democratic agenda. It brought together groups from nine Pennsylvania counties to defeat Donald Trump and to support progressive local and state candidates, some of whom were members of Democratic Socialists of America.

Involvement with the statewide organization challenged and transformed the local group. The decision to become Berks Stands Up was not unanimous, and some on the executive board resigned their posts. Those who remained drew on their relationship with Sunrise Berks to recruit young and non-white activists to leadership positions in the new organization. Several months later, when Berks Stands Up endorsed Sanders in the Democratic presidential primary, there was a further exit of moderate members, but again their numbers were boosted with new recruits. Berks Stands Up arrived at another crossroads only weeks later during the wave of racial justice protests.

Frontlines

The police murder of George Floyd in Spring 2020 catalyzed a wave of protests in the United States. Two months into the pandemic, as Covid-19 deaths mounted, especially in poor, immigrant, and minority communities, and as unemployment soared, people across the country took to the streets. The mobilizations encouraged a new cohort of Black leaders in Reading, broadened and radicalized the existing left/liberal alignment, and opened frontlines of struggle.

When I began fieldwork, there were few Black-led political organizations in Reading/Berks. Reading had a long-standing chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that sponsored candidate forums, hosted an annual Juneteenth celebration, and sponsored community events. There was no local BLM chapter to mobilize young, radical activists. Organizing was partly limited by the Black community's small size (never more than 13 percent of the city's population), and because working- and



Figure 9.2. Mobilization in Reading. © Sharryn Kashmir

middle-class African Americans left for the suburbs when housing markets opened to them after the 1960s. Urban disinvestment and capital abandonment made sustaining community institutions in the city even more difficult.

More profoundly, the presence in Berks of white hate groups posed a threat to community efforts. The short-lived House of Soul is a case in point. The social center opened in 1967, sponsored by the federally funded Detached Worker Project of the Reading YMCA. It was shut down by municipal officials only two years later, after the city saw two nights of disturbances. The unrest followed an episode of racist intimidation outside the center: white youths drove by the building shouting racial slurs and then graffitied the facade. Young people gathered at the House of Soul took to the streets in response. The intertwined forces of white supremacy, racialized disinvestment, and urban decline stalled progressive activism in the 1960s and 1970s, and took a toll on the churches and clubs that had earlier nurtured Black community life (Penn State Berks n.d. a).

Without established organizations in the lead, the racial justice rallies and marches in Reading were planned via social media by new activists. Local LGBTQIA+, education, and arts groups joined in. Amid the upswell, two young women founded Decolonize Reading,

with the goal of inaugurating a Black-led initiative to challenge racism and colonialism. As monuments to slave traders and Confederate Civil War officers were toppled in England and the United States, and the symbolic control of public space was in the news, they turned their attention to the Christopher Columbus statue in City Park. In its debut as a political actor, Decolonize Reading co-sponsored a rally against white supremacy with Make the Road, Sunrise, and Berks Stands Up. Organizers assembled a crowd of about a hundred in City Park. A dark-skinned Dominican man, a member of Make the Road, told of his personal experiences of anti-Black racism in the Latinx community. Other speakers recounted harassment by the Reading police, read aloud testimonies of immigrant detainees in Berks detention center, and deplored the Columbus statue for symbolizing European colonialism in a city populated with immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America.

The racial justice upsurge emboldened the left/liberal alignment in Reading/Berks. The new leaders of Berks Stands Up posted a statement on Facebook in support of the BLM agenda to defund the police. Dissent and conflict were posted forthwith. Some group members objected to the word 'defund,' and they proposed alternate language they believed might sit better with their neighbors and with the white, suburban swing voters whom they hoped to sway. Young Black, Latinx, and white commentators forcefully countered that it was not the group's place to edit the Black Lives message. The Black Lives platform connected police brutality, skyrocketing police budgets, and disinvestment in Black communities. It linked oppression and violence to the dispossession of labor and property dating back to slavery and colonialism, and to the extraction of value via private jails and housing gentrification. It called for public spending on policing to be redirected to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods (M4BL; Ransby 2018). Over the course of their argument over the word 'defund,' Berks Stands Up members did not immediately recognize connections between the struggle to defund the police and their own fight to re-embed the market and win a new New Deal. They missed the opportunity to link these different experiences of oppression and dispossession, and to uncover the relations among them. Nonetheless, they stayed the course of alliance. When an African American man was arrested in a Walmart in a Berks suburb months later, members of Berks Stands Up assembled in protest and joined the shouts of "defund the police!"

Value and the Relations among Them

The accomplishments of the Socialist Movement in Reading/Berks are largely forgotten; even in activist circles, the Reading Socialists are rarely remembered. One notable exception occurred during the initial surge of Covid-19 in spring 2020, when nonessential businesses were closed in Pennsylvania, and residents were advised to stay home. Sunrise Berks put online its two-week course on tactics, social movement history, and political theory. Only weeks earlier, Bernie Sanders had withdrawn from the presidential primary. As Sunrise members had fully embraced Sanders' candidacy, they felt Joe Biden's centrist victory as a stinging disappointment. The hub leader searched for consolation and inspiration in local history.

He told the group that there were sit-down strikes in six hosiery mills Berks in the 1930s, making the county a national locus of union organizing (see Kennedy 1979). Reading was a center of municipal Socialism from the 1920s through the 1940s, one of only three urban centers in the United States where the party was at the helm of city government. The Socialist administration built the city's first children's playground, introduced the bid-for-contract system to combat corruption, and operated a city-owned electric plant. The party maintained close ties to the labor movement, and nurtured a social network that followed railroad lines from city to rural towns. Moreover, the Socialists were crack organizers, and they won races by going door to door and building a strong base in working-class wards (Pratt 1970, 1975; Hendrickson 1972, 1973; Stetler 1974; Gavigan 2021).

The hub leader recalled the city's Socialist past to make two points: working people had once won elections and commanded power in the local arena; and political horizons in Reading/Berks had once been more radical, and they could be again. Public ownership of the municipal power plant made the case that even private property could be challenged. None of the multiracial young people at the virtual meeting knew of Reading's Socialist Party, and over the course of the session, they registered its significance.

During the training, W.E.B Du Bois' warning about race and labor, issued a century earlier, was unexamined. The Socialists Party of Du Bois' day fought for "labor's hire" over of "employer's profit," but it did not dependably do so in the cause of "all work throughout the world." The labors of white women and people of color were too often left out of the party's political vision and organizing. For Du Bois, it was not enough to make the case that these omissions were unfair, nor to affirm that inclusion of all workers was a "high,

ethical ideal.” Ethics and ideals were certainly necessary tools for social change, but they were not sufficient by themselves. Du Bois went further than a proclamation of values. He made the case that “no real reorganization of industry could be permanently made with the majority of mankind left out” (Du Bois [1920] 1969: 120). His intervention therefore shifted the terms of analysis from many concrete, differentially recognized labors of Black and white workers, women and men, to a single, abstract labor comprised of all human toil. He had ethics in mind, but also singular value. He characterized this value as “labor’s hire versus employer’s profit,” and those words were a forceful, resonant reference to Marx’s surplus value, produced by all work throughout the world.

Sunrise hub members—some burdened with student debt, some working precarious jobs, some active in the effort to shut the immigrant detention center—were introduced to Reading Socialism while living in a majority Latinx city, in a majority white, non-Latinx county, where layered histories of capital accumulation and abandonment etched economic, social, and political cleavages. Connections between past and present, and relations among experiences of oppression, dispossession, exploitation, and extraction were knowable during their Zoom history lesson. If they were not fully recognized at the time, they were nevertheless sketched for future understanding and action. Making connections between values and value, labors and labor, as Du Bois did a century ago, is as much a necessary project for left activists as it is an intellectual problem for contemporary Marxist scholars. The challenge is “how to *take advantage* of the unevenness and particular conjunctural combinations of social relations” (Bond, Desai, and Ngwane 2013: 254, emphasis in original). If we offer thick descriptions of cultural ethics but neglect surplus value, or if we detail concrete livelihoods but disregard universal labor, we miss the essential relations among them.

Toward that goal, Marxist anthropologists seek to renew the concept of class to chart people’s shifting livelihoods and forms of work, and to capture their changing relationships to capital, the state, and each other. The tool kit of labor, value, and frontlines helps us to see these processes as they unfold in concrete places, over time, and to recognize the hard work of organizing, building institutions, and creating alliances. The anthropology of labor privileges the political terrain on which different forms of work are categorized, divided, or unified, and it focuses an ethnographic lens on how “culturally embedded forms of organization are [made and] disorganized; place-bound paths of dispossession are continuously generated; and wage

and unwaged forms of making a living change repeatedly and pull people apart or together at different conjunctures through space and time. All contribute to the historical dynamics of remaking differences [and similarities] that reconfigure labour/capital power geometries” (Narotzky 2018: 36).

The concept of value puts the totality of social reproduction, not just the wage, at the center of class analysis, and it gives us purchase on the many ways working people claim a share of the surplus by making demands on capital and the state. The division or unification of labor is critical to that equation. Frontlines refers to these many points struggle, and to the fact that these nodes of conflict may be temporary, incomplete, and may fail to cohere. The three social movement groups in Reading/Berks sometimes ‘stayed in their own lane’ and built their own constituencies around their own issues—immigrant rights; the Green New Deal; democratic participation. As well, they reliably showed up for each other’s events and supported each other’s campaigns. Their alliance also produced moments of solidarity, when the relations among divided sectors of Reading/Berks, which are typically hidden from view, could be known.

When social movement groups show up as a heterogeneous, collective presence, they are pushed toward a more comprehensive explanation of capitalist processes. Greater combination in struggle may lead to more encompassing alliances, analysis, and politics; and they may fuel larger programmatic and ideological abstractions and greater universalism in order to explain the antagonisms and contradictions of capitalism. No such thoroughgoing synthesis was forthcoming when Make the Road celebrated May Day with Latinx non-unionized workers and small business owners, but without members of the large industrial unions in attendance. It was remained offstage as well, when Berks Stands Up fought internally over the invocation to defund the police but failed to recognize the links to the new social contract that the group sought to bring about. When Sunrise Berks members imagined possible socialist horizons but neglected the Socialist Party’s record on Black workers, that synthesis was likewise forestalled. If the potential to connect different but shared relations to capitalist value was eclipsed in these instances, the potential for greater unity could be imagined nevertheless.

Left/liberal alignments like the configuration in Reading/Berks can be seen in other US cities. Each has its own history, demographics, and path dependency. Philadelphia, New York, and Oakland have larger African American populations, more continuous recent activist traditions, and stronger labor movements. In those cities, political

formations include BLM and M4BL, reconfigured ACORN affiliates, the Working Families Party, and unions. In studying these developments, it is imperative that we rethink class. This point is not to declare the (re)making of working classes as an already accomplished fact, nor to prioritize class over other identities, contradictions, or conflicts. Rather the project is to apprehend the uneven combinations of people and struggles, and to grasp the relations among them in order to achieve greater universality and power.

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Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor (edited with Gus Carbonella, Berghahn Books, 2014); and *The 'Myth' of Mondragón: Cooperatives, Politics and Working-Class Life in a Basque Town* (SUNY, 1996).

Notes

1. See for example, Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 2015; Gill 2016; Gill and Kasmir 2016; Kalb 1997, 2015; Kalb and Mollona 2018; Kalb and Tak 2005; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Kasmir and Gill 2018, 2022; Lem and Barber 2010; Narotzky 2018; Nonini and Susser 2020; Smith 2014, 2018, 2020; Susser 2012, 2018.
2. The brutality of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police in May 2020 was captured on video and widely disseminated via social media. The counterresponse was nearly immediate. Protests were staged in cities and suburbs throughout the United States, and worldwide. Years of organizing by Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives undergirded these spontaneous eruptions that mobilized veteran political actors, as well as massive numbers of new participants. Floyd's killing occurred in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, when racial disparities in health and economic security were fully on display. The spring uprising ushered people out of pandemic lockdown; the marches were interracial, and lasted for months in the run-up to the national election.
3. Scholars note the importance of organized labor for myriad social and political struggles in which unions do not take a leading role. Susana Narotzky (2016a) underlines unions' overlooked role in the 2011 Indignados mobilizations in Spain. David McNally (2013) traces the influence of working-class politics and labor unions, despite their apparent absence from recent mass mobilizations in Colombia, Mexico, Tunisia, and Egypt. Karen Brodtkin's (2007) study of student activism in Los Angeles likewise shows the continued significance of unions for building social movements.

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— Afterword —

REFLECTIONS ON VALUE, OBJECTIVITY, AND DEATH

Christopher Krupa



The labor theory of value emerges as Marx's conceptualization of capitalist economic life, in which are included ties he sees to its necessary conditions and results, and in particular to the totally alienated people who inhabit this period. It was to describe, explain and condemn their situation that this theory was given birth.

— Bertell Ollman, *Alienation*

Value

Marx's theory of value was controversial from the moment he introduced it. This was intentional, as it was a polemical theory, the centerpiece to his radical critique of bourgeois society under capitalism. Not everyone was supposed to agree with it. If they did, it would invalidate the conditions (oppositional class struggle) that demanded it in the first place.

Don Kalb introduces this volume with an approach to value that appears to do away with such polemics. He does this by assembling the many ways that value tends to be understood and studied into three, then two, distinct 'senses' of the concept, and then converting the things that are thought to distinguish them into the very forces that bind them together. The two main approaches to value are well known. On the one hand, there is what Kalb calls the singular or 'monistic' notion of value, more or less corresponding to Marx's contribution to the labor theory of value. Value here is the intangible

product of labor that renders all commodified matter fungible, enables surplus extraction, and structures social relations around class (for starters). On the other hand, there is the plural sense of value—as *values*—more or less corresponding to the way it is used in ethics and politics and everyday speech to denote highly particular evaluations of worth, judgment, and virtue, as well as the ways such evaluations inform collective attachments, organize practical action, and orient moral behavior. Bringing these two senses of value together neither erases nor confirms their distinction, but opens up the core problem for contributors to this volume to explore—how and under what conditions do these two kinds of value relate? Proposing that they do, in fact, relate, and that there is a need to think them together—and that one does not have to adapt Marxism to noncapitalist social formations to do this—is already a notable advance, given the antagonism often thought to exist between these different notions of value, and the scholars affiliated with them. This includes Kalb himself, who less than a decade ago called the moral-ethical camp of anthropological value studies an a-critical, fanciful “potlach among the chiefs,” and declared his vehement opposition to it (Kalb 2018: 67). Now something of an olive branch seems to be extended. It may be, it seems to say, that we are all talking about the same thing after all.

But the olive branch turns out to be a Trojan horse. The second part of Kalb’s method, and what really seems to push this volume’s ethnographic project along, is not only the unwavering affirmation that the thing uniting (economic) value and (ethical) values is capitalism—it should be rather uncontroversial at this point to claim that standards of judgment and acts of discernment reflect a range of possibilities worked out within the conditions of a particular mode of accumulation. It is also the more nuanced suggestion that it is precisely where the two notions of value seem most at odds—where current configurations of value extraction appear entirely unrelated to, or theoretically incompatible with, what people value as good and proper—that we need to focus our attention, because it is in those sites that the insidiousness of capitalism’s penetration of the social and of personhood might run deepest. As this volume’s lead term, the notion of insidiousness presents a major challenge to claims of incommensurability between value and values. It also presses us to reframe any assumption of a space exterior to capitalism (including subjective or practical domains of discernment, action, and so on) as instead a ‘frontline of value,’ a space of struggle, sometimes identified as such (Kasmir, this volume), over

the terms by which people and futures are invested with modes of surplus extraction.

If part of what makes capital so insidious is its conversion of the apparent plurality and particularism of values into coordinated frontlines of (monistic) value capture, it may also go further, eviscerating the very capacity for things central to the constitution of personal orientations and moral acts to be identified so squarely as a 'value' at all—much like capitalism itself has increasingly blended with the notion of life to become virtually unnamable in popular discourse. In fact, if part of what seems to prevent values from being assimilated with value is the former's refusal of commensurability—no standard measurement exists to evaluate among them (Lambek 2008: 145)—could the claim to the relative autonomy of values from value, and the former's adherence to an image of social plurality, be seen as symptomatic of the libidinal force of late capitalist nostalgia that cultural critics like Fredric Jameson have been trying to alert us to since at least the 1980s?

The postmodern moment is also, among other things, to be understood as the moment in which late capitalism becomes conscious of itself, and thematizes itself, in terms of extreme social differentiation; or, in other words, of a 'pluralism' [that] is constitutive rather than, in an older liberalism, simply ideal. For this last, pluralism is a value, that expresses itself in terms of moral imperatives such as tolerance and democracy (in the sociological sense of the acknowledgement of multiple group interests). In late capitalism, however, it is the complexity of social relations, the inescapable fact of the coexistence of unimaginably atomized and fragmented segments of the social, that come to be celebrated in its own right as the very bonus of pleasure and libidinal investment of the new social order as a whole. (Jameson 2009: 212)

Jameson goes on to add that pluralism "has therefore now become something like an existential category, a descriptive feature that characterizes our present everyday life, rather than an ethical imperative to be realized within it." His assertion feels consistent with this volume's efforts to bypass both the impasses between theorizing together value and values, and the cruder forms of mashing them together. In his example there is no straight line between pluralism's diffusion from either a value or an ideologeme into an atmospheric condition, on the one hand, and its support for the hyper-atomized class process of late capitalist accumulation, on the other. What we see instead is the ongoing innovation of an existential terrain that reduces friction between conceivable forms of human becoming and emergent forms of transferring surplus from some people to others. We could call this the foundations of a method for thinking through

how value and values articulate. Or we could, following Marx, simply call this whole thing value.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle arising within efforts to fit Marx's notion of value into the study of virtue and ethics is that which mistakes it for a strictly economic concept. In this reading, Marx is only a different variant of the political economists like Petty, Steuart and Ricardo, from whom he drew his conceptual raw materials. Value is here reducible to what, in Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx called that "third thing," the quantifiable sum of labor time invested in a commodity's production, and thus also the meta-level standard that allows for their "mutual replaceability" or exchange (Marx 1976: 127). Full stop. In this sense, the notion of value is primarily a theory of objects—their biography, what they house, how they circulate, how they stack up against one another, and so on—and an exercise in quantification. Sometimes this leads to more erroneous reductions of value to "market value" and even "price." But even when not, the general tendency to moor Marx's notion of value in brute economics is where the rift separating it from values and virtue is most firmly anchored: value is relative, values are absolute; value is about objects, values are about subjects; value demands commensurability and thus choice, values are incommensurable and rest on judgment (Lambek 2008). The two should not be conflated.

Althusser's contributions to *Reading Capital* open with a related observation. Even though Marx himself, right to the end, believed his most significant discoveries to be the value/ use-value distinction and the notion of surplus value, in fact "the concepts of value and surplus-value are precisely the concepts on which all the criticism addressed to Marx by modern economists has focused" (Althusser 1970: 81). These criticisms are in many ways the inverse of those outlined above, but rest on the same premise. Value is an economic concept that is sloppy economics: impossible to measure accurately, impossible to quantify precisely, too metaphysical. The problem with these criticisms, Althusser notes, and I would extend the comment to more than just economists, is that they rest on a profound "misunderstanding of Marx's object itself: a misunderstanding that made the economists read their own object onto Marx, instead of reading another object in Marx" (Althusser 1970: 83). Everything, then, comes down to this: What is this other "object" that Marx created his own notion of value to address?

Objectivity

The general and necessary tendencies of capital must be distinguished from their forms of appearance.

—Karl Marx, *Capital*

The answer to this question is complex, but a shorthand of it can be gleaned from the epigraph that opens this chapter. In Ollman's reading, the true object of Marx's labor theory of value is a particular form of life, in its entirety, as lived in a capitalist economic system. The work it is to do is at once expressive, analytical, and political—"It was to describe, explain and condemn their situation [the 'totally alienated people who inhabit this period'] that this theory was given birth" (Ollman 1971: 170–71). And how does the concept of value do that?

Countless attempts to answer this question exist, not all of them fully compatible, but let me chart a quick line through some of my favorites, beginning with David Harvey who himself has answered this question countless times. In his most synthetic summary, Harvey (2018) begins by producing what seems to be a rather straightforward mapping of value's emergence from the ongoing and systemic interaction between the production, circulation, and accumulation of capital. Referring to Volume 1 of *Capital*, Harvey notes that

Marx begins that work with an examination of the surface appearance of use value and exchange value in the material act of commodity exchange, and posits the existence of value (an immaterial but objective relation) behind the quantitative aspect of exchange value. This value is initially taken to be a reflection of the social (abstract) labour congealed in commodities (chapter 1). As a regulatory norm in the market place, value can exist, Marx shows, only when and where commodity exchange has become "a normal social act." This normalization depends upon the existence of private property relations, juridical individuals and perfectly competitive markets (chapter 2). Such a market can only work with the rise of monetary forms (chapter 3) that facilitate and lubricate exchange relations in efficient ways, while providing a convenient vehicle for storing value. Money thus enters the picture as a material representation of value. Value cannot exist without its representation. In chapters 4 through 6, Marx shows that it is only in a system where the aim and object of economic activity is commodity production that exchange becomes a necessary as well as a normal social act. It is the circulation of money as capital (chapter 5) that consolidates the conditions for the formation of capital's distinctive value form as a regulatory norm. But the circulation of capital presupposes the prior existence of wage labour as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market (chapter 6). (Harvey 2018: 1)

Harvey is dissatisfied with his own summary, reminding us that it could easily be read as confirmation of the simple economic (my word) critique of Marx's notion of value being little more than a reiteration of Ricardo, and thus equally subject to the latter's failings. Value begins as (abstract) labor, enters commodities, transforms into the representation of their meta-standard of quantifiable evaluation (money), and thus returns to circulation as something more or less akin to price. Again—value is a (perhaps expansive) theory of objects, of commensurability, and about the grounds for market behavior (choice). But, as Harvey (2018: 2) notes, this is not the end of the story, “[i]t is in fact the beginning”. “Marx was not primarily interested in price,” Harvey reminds us. “He has a different agenda.” And what is this agenda?

Moving beyond the opening chapters of *Capital*, what we see unfold is an attempt to “describe in intricate detail the consequences for the labourer of living and working in a world where the law of value, as constituted through the generalization and normalization of exchange in the market place, rules” (Harvey 2018: 3). And what are these consequences? Certainly, their “aggregate effect (chapter 25) is to diminish the status of the labourer, to create an industrial reserve army, to enforce working conditions of abject misery and desperation among the working classes, and to condemn much of labour to living under conditions of social reproduction that are miserable in the extreme” (ibid.). There can be no denying this assessment, and all analysis must return to it. But there is more. The story of value, of what it is and how it works, is necessarily also the one that could be told by compiling all the phenomenological descriptors Harvey sprinkles in among his mapping of value's path of emergence. Value is an “immaterial but objective relation” that comes to be in a world in which “surface appearances” at once “posit” something different, lurking behind them, but dissimulate its apprehension through the “normalization” of relations regulated by a mediation-thing (a meta-value, money) that is somehow both a precondition for, and representative effect of, the thing (value) animating not only how the economy works but how people, as always potential nexus points of value's production and movement, work. This is not meant to apply everywhere or to everything. It is specific to that “system where the aim and object of economic activity is commodity production,” and in which commodity “exchange becomes a necessary as well as a normal social act”—what Ollman shorthanded as “capitalist economic life,” its “necessary conditions and results.” And in this context, value does more than describe the commodity and explain

exchange relations. As a dynamic framework for experience-in-the-world, it outlines the conditions through which a person comes to be not only an *object of value* but also a *subject of values*, how moral discernment and judgment are effected in ways that are apparently at odds with market calculations, and how one is able to live through or against virtue in ways seemingly independent of value's grasp.¹ It points us to understanding how value and values not only become totally interdependent but also how they might come to appear incommensurable.

This is all part of Marx's writing on value, as many have now shown—a theory not of objects but objectivity, not matter but materiality; this expansive understanding aligns with Althusser's famous but frequently criticized (e.g., Hartsock and Smith 1979) claim that the true “object of Marxist philosophy” is “a theory of the conditions of the process of knowledge”; not knowledge itself, but the historical conditions through which certain ways of knowing the world become possible or impossible. This, to Althusser, was the true object of a philosophy whose entire corpus of contributions rests on the value concept, and which, as the kernel of that, arrives at something like a radical deconstruction of the historical basis for empiricism—a materialist unpacking of the ways a gulf between the real and “thought-about-the-real,” two ways of knowing the world, comes about and shift according to different modes of surplus capture (Althusser 1970: 87). For many, this is the seminal contribution of Hegel to Marx's thought, the essence of Marx's reworking of the dialectic, and thus the critical entry point to understanding Marx's advances over Ricardo's labor theory of value.

In a related way, Patrick Murray (2013) begins his critique of Backhaus's (1980) influential “On the Dialectics of the Value-Form,” by noting the latter's achievements, three of which are especially relevant to this discussion. The first is Backhaus's claim that “Marx's theory of value has been mistakenly identified with the classical, or Ricardian, labour theory of value. Marx's theory is actually cut from a different cloth; it is about the specific social form of labour.” This echoes our earlier diagnoses of how scholars of ethics and morality have found Marx's notion of value to be incommensurable with the study of human values. This too: “Marx has been mistaken for a political economist, when, in fact, he is a profound critic of political economy” (Murray 2013: 129–30). The third achievement introduces something new: “The analysis of the logical structure of the value form is not to be separated from the analysis of its historical, social context” (Backhaus 1980: 107). What is new here is what a theorist

like Backhaus means by “historical, social context” when that context is capitalist.

At its broadest level, “context” here is framed by a dialectical relationship between two “forms,” a social form and a value form, each of which is internally related to the other while also being itself a dialectical relationship. The internal dialectic of each is governed by a relationship between what Murray refers to as “essence” and “appearance” — appearance is the tangible, perceptible expression not of itself but of its abstract force of determination, the essence. The classic example here is the value (substance) and price or exchange-value (appearance) of a commodity. Murray cites this classic passage from Marx as evidence:

Commodities come into the world in the form of use-values or material goods, such as iron, linen, corn, etc. This is their plain homely, natural form. However, they are only commodities because they have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value. Therefore they appear only as commodities, or have the form of commodities, in so far as they possess a double form, i.e., natural form and value form. (Marx 1976: 138 in Murray 2013: 134)

The value form of a commodity is “supersensible” and “purely social,” therefore unable to find expression in isolation but only in relation with another commodity, realized through exchange or exchangeability. The point is that the latter, price or market value, that mediated by money, in other words, is not value—it is only the form through which value is expressed. “*Essence must appear,*” Murray (2013: 134, emphasis in original) notes (with a nod to Hegel), but not, of course, as itself. Value, the essence of what makes any commodity a commodity, is rooted in the expenditure of labor-power, and can be comparatively measured in magnitude, but not in ways that directly tell us anything substantial about the way this is expressed, as exchange-value-price-money equivalence. Rather, what it tells us about is the other form to which it is dialectically related, the social form, the social conditions determining both the expenditure of labor-power in commodity manufacture more broadly, and the social conditions activating the transfer of surplus value into the commodity form. This too is governed by the dialectical relationship of essence and appearance. If the social conditions animating surplus value transfer in a given society are what constitute what we are here calling the ‘essence’ of the social form (through which value thereby comes to be the ‘essence’ inhering in its objects), what then would be the units of ‘appearance’ that ‘express’

(but cannot directly reveal or exhibit direct determination of, like the relationship between value and price) the ‘essence’ of this social form? Values?

It bears repeating that Marx’s positing of a dialectical relationship between essence and appearance within and between historically situated ‘forms’ implies no direct or specific determination of the perceptible, worldly, ‘natural’ level of appearance by the abstract ‘essence’ that it expresses. Indeed, the nature of this relationship is inherently self-effacing, as Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism makes clear. In the case of this relationship’s centrality to understanding value and the value form, and their cross-dialectical expression in the social form of what we broadly think of as human values, the above summary of Jameson’s discussion of pluralism under late capitalism should now be broadly relevant: what we are addressing is the ongoing innovation of an existential terrain that reduces friction between conceivable forms of human becoming and emergent forms of transferring surplus from some people to others.

That is how I might summarize what I take to be the task of *Insidious Capital* and why its authors insist so emphatically and comprehensively on a return to thinking about value. Insidiousness replaces incommensurability (between value and values). The object of Marx’s theory of value is life itself in capitalist society, and it is designed specifically to show (and thereby critique, overturn) how its ‘natural,’ tangible social forms are dialectical expressions of an ‘essence’ rooted in the social force of surplus transfer—some people will appropriate what others have produced and take gain from their loss. Value points to that thing that is transferred. Its own essence is rooted in the expenditure of human labor-power, but it expresses itself in things like market value and price, which establish conditions of equivalence and commensurability of the objects housing them by mediation of the meta-value of money. Expression is not a disclosure or revelation; in fact, it necessarily obfuscates.² Approaching value as price or exchange-value, or object-centered or purely ‘economic’—or, we would insist, separating values from value—mistakes appearance for essence. It is itself a symptom of value’s ‘expression,’ a phenomenological effect of the dialectic. Part of insidious capital’s insidiousness comes through the worldly force of objective appearance. But if, as Marx (in Jameson 2009: 64) notes, “the whole of existing society . . . is henceforth founded on a poetic license, a figurative expression,” we cannot simply, as Jameson argues, “substitute essence for appearance, as one substitutes truth for falsehood,” because

the very concept of objective appearance warns us that any such resolution of the contradiction in favor of either essence or appearance, truth or falsehood, is tantamount to doing away with the ambiguous reality itself. The dialectic stands as an imperative to hold the opposites together, and, as it were, to abolish the autonomy of both terms in favor of a pure tension one must necessarily preserve. At this point, perhaps, we leave even the subjective effects of the dialectic behind us, and venture into speculations as to its relevance today: for it is not Marx's description of the "essence" of capitalism which has changed (nor Hegel's of the "determination of reflection" generally), but rather very precisely that "objective appearance" of the world of global capitalism which seems far enough from the surface life of Marx's Victorian of nascent-modernist period. (Jameson 2009: 65)

By my reading, *Insidious Capital* takes up exactly this task. It does this by replacing 'speculations' about possible capitalist futures with deep ethnography of the actual tensions animating the frontlines of global capitalism today.

Death

Nevertheless, there remains in the West, as elsewhere, also the conception that blood sacrifice—the active, even positive, renunciation (or threat of renunciation) of life—lies at the heart (the bloody, beating heart) of human value.

—Michael Lambek, "Value and Virtue"

I am fully convinced by Michael Lambek's brilliant discovery of value's conceptual origins in the act of blood sacrifice, although the type of primal scene I imagine to have first carved out the bloody, beating heart of value might be slightly different than those he has in mind. What comes to mind are incidents like those Vincent Brown (2008) examines in his study of the place of death in the profit matrix of Jamaica's colonial plantation system, and in the accounting practices of the transatlantic slave trade supporting it. I am thinking of cases like the *Zong* slave ship massacre of 1780 in which the ship's captain, one Richard Hanley, and resident surgeon, Luke Collingwood, drew on "sound financial rationalization" and underwriting policies protecting slave merchants from spoiled cargo losses to throw 132 purportedly sick Africans, destined for the Caribbean slave markets, into the sea.

On 29 November, crewmen came into the dark and suffocating hold, selected fifty-four ailing men, women, boys, and girls, and took them above into sunlight and fresh air. They then bound their hands and cast them overboard. The next day they came for forty-three more. Certainly not all of these people

were terminally ill, for one African man had the strength to grab hold of a rope that hung overboard, drag himself up to a porthole, and clamber back into the ship, where crew members found him hours later. Momentarily shielded from Collingwood's surveillance, the sailors sympathized with the man and returned him to the hold. Maybe they suspected that they and their own sick mates might have been similarly dispatched, if only they had been worth something dead. (Brown 2008: 159)

A similarly sacrificial logic animated the bio-accounting practices of Jamaica's planter class in its distribution of death on land. As Brown (2008: 56) summarizes, the death of slaves from overwork, punishment, torture, malnutrition, disease, lack of medical care, and more was so extensive that, "[h]ad it not been for fresh recruits from Africa, plantation slavery in Jamaica might have rapidly extinguished itself." Sacrificial substitution could be calibrated to maximize death's optimal productive efficiency: "In the 1760s, [the "outstandingly wealthy" (Brown 2008: 95) plantation owner and attorney] Simon Taylor thought that sixteen to twenty new slaves were needed each year on Golden Grove [plantation, to replenish the dead]. Yet given the prosperity of the time, he was able to assure [fellow planter Chaloner] Arcedeckne, "In three years' time each Negro will pay for himself." Thanks to similar assessments on the part of slaveholders throughout the island concerning death and wealth, the slave population continued to grow until the end of the trade" (Brown 2008: 56–57).

"From the mid-eighteenth century through the end of chattel slavery, in one of history's greatest episodes of creative destruction, Jamaica's dynamic and profitable economy consumed its inhabitants," Brown (2008: 57) argues. This conversion of death into an elementary form of 'proto-value,' and proto-value into the vital force of other lives, was anything but metaphorical in the world of plantation slavery.

When they first came into the hands of Europeans . . . alienated Africans had often believed that whites would eat them. As Africans were incorporated into plantation life, we can say, with little exaggeration, that this assumption was ultimately correct. American planters would exhaust their slaves' lives as productive capacity, grinding them into sugar, coffee, and other crops for export, primarily to Europe, where they would indeed be consumed—but only if they could survive their initial adjustment to slave society. For all its economic success as an outpost of Empire, Jamaica routinely destroyed its black people. (Brown 2008: 49)

To consider colonial plantation slavery as the primal scene of value's foundations is by now an established, historical fact, given what

we know about the dual role of this system, being at once the experimental context in which much of industrial capitalism's framework of labor discipline (among other things) was first worked out, and a directly involved and essential provisioner of raw materials for European factories (Mintz 1979; Thomas 2016; Williams 2021 [1944]; Wynter 1971). To this we would add everything slavery itself provided capitalism with as a model of how what Sylvia Wynter (2003: 288, 319) calls "value difference" — ways of establishing, legitimating, and enforcing ideas of human difference, the "descriptive statement of the human," or "master code of symbolic life and death" around which "each human order organizes itself" — could be tethered to economic ends (Robinson 1983). The critical point I want to think through from this concerns the relationship between value and death, and, specifically, the question of what it does to our thinking about value when we place sacrificial death at its heart.

Here I can only begin an answer to this question, one that returns us to a way of thinking about surplus and excess as constitutive rather than derivative of the thing they appear to be merely extensions of—a reversal of what present as primary and secondary orders, in other words. What this means is thinking of value in general as that which primarily creates the social relations enabling the specific form of value-as-remainder (i.e., surplus value) to exist. Surplus value can of course be considered the essence form of profit's appearance; but it can also be highlighted as the precise location where the violence of capitalist class processes is most firmly anchored.

This, I think, is partly what Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013: 49, 50) is pushing us to consider in her provocative equation "racial body = value + excess" or "Laboring Black Body = value + excess": excess here is the force or condition that permits the violence already inherent in, albeit occluded, the general term (value) to become apparent without consequence. Racialization here names that force. The work it does emerges as the 'excess' form of its 'already-existence' — the appearance form, we could say of its other, foundational, essence form, each dialectically indispensable (internal) to the other. As Lindon Barrett (1999: 28) puts it in *Blackness and Value*,

value is an impeachment of the Other, the willful expenditure of the Other in an imposing production of the self. The perspective of the Other thus reveals the relativities of value as ratios of violence; the discovery of value from the perspectives of the Other reveals the exorbitant foundations and overdeterminations of value. Violence—to emphasize the point—is the opening that allows value. It remains the original mechanism by means of which valuation initiates, then resists, change. Yet it would be a mistake to

believe that value and violence are coterminous. Rather, it is imperative to recognize that value introduces itself by way of a violent agency that it subsequently seeks to deny.

Part of that denial occurs through the abstraction of value itself in the mass circulation of objects that bear it, each occluding not only the social relations of their production but also the surplus value whose capture was the reason they came to exist in the first place. As Barrett (1998: 18) stresses, “the violence perpetuated in processes of value—in elaborating a binarism of valued and devalued—is not always or merely played out in physical terms.”

Death is the space in which the life energy of one is seized by another for their own flourishing. Value, in the way Marx came to theorize it, is founded on the sacrificial exchange of death for life, on rendering death productive, on the circulation of vital force, taken from some and appropriated by others for the latter’s benefit. This, ultimately, is what we are talking about when we speak of value and, thus, of values; the ways morality and ethics and systems of virtue endorse that or critique it or find ways to exist without being at all troubled by the routinized horror of it all.

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Notes

1. “The fraught and contradictory relation between production and realization rests on the fact that value depends on the existence of wants, needs and desires backed by [the] ability to pay in a population of consumers. Such wants, needs and desires are deeply embedded in the world of social reproduction. Without them, as Marx notes in the first chapter of *Capital*, there is no value” (Harvey 2018: 6).
2. See Eiss (2008) for a sharp discussion of the role of history in this obfuscation.

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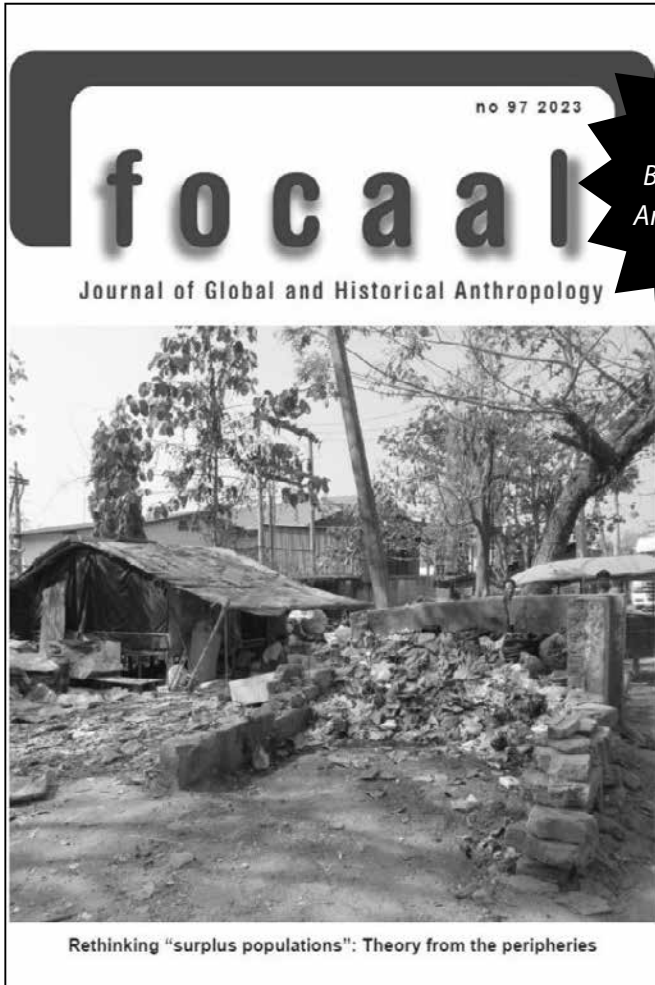
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