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On Simultaneity

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Early in my fieldwork in Equatorial Guinea, I sat down with the human resources manager of a major U.S. oil firm. I pattered awkwardly about my emerging project—something about how companies set up shop in a new place—while he smiled and nodded from his chair, at one point leaning to the side to leaf through a desk drawer. As I stumbled to a stop he passed me a document, an article from *African Studies Quarterly* entitled “The Political Economy of Oil in Equatorial Guinea” (McSherry 2006). “Everything you need to know is in this article,” the HR guy said. “If the government here doesn’t get its act together, this is what’s going to happen.” I was familiar with the article, written by a political science graduate student who had applied resource curse theory to Equatorial Guinea, positing that “oil has exacerbated already present pathologies in Equatorial Guinea’s political economy, paving the way for future problems of underdevelopment, instability, and authoritarian rule” (McSherry 2006, 24).

Encountering economic theory in the field could prompt an anthropologist to dwell on the problem of misrepresentation: how naïve that all resource rich nation-states could be conflated in resource-curse analyses, how illogical to think that the same theory could be applied everywhere. But to take this approach would be to miss the productivity of economic theory in shaping the world, and it would miss the ways in which the human resources manager was himself profitably at work in the world these “mis” representations help to organize. The question here is not narrowly about the performativity of economic theory, but rather about a generative moment of what Bear, Ho, Tsing, and Yanagisako (2015) call in their manifesto *conversion*. In this case, it is the conversion of an economic theory into a particular kind of postcolonial common sense: for the HR manager (white, Canadian, male, living temporarily in central Africa), the resource curse provided an authoritative, causal narrative that located the pathological effects of oil extraction squarely within “the African state” while his own work for the corporation disappeared from view. From this habitation of distance—Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2002, 66) “particular way of seeing”—a felicitous and consequential

“Africa” emerges, an Africa of pathological states and aggrieved citizens. An implied other emerges as well, the benevolent corporation that proffers market rationality in the face of corruption and standardization in the face of irregularity. It is partially through these conversions that “diverse social and economic projects”—in this case, U.S. oil firms in central Africa—“seem coherent despite (and through) the heterogeneous, disaggregated practices from which they are constituted” (Bear, Ho, Tsing, and Yanagisako 2015).

Ethnographic encounters with “formalizations”—which include, in my own work, economic theory, contracts and subcontracting, infrastructure, and the national economy form—offer the opportunity to explore local complexity and contingency or to show the teeming social “beneath” the ostensibly economic. But to stop there suggests that the formalization in question is somehow superficial, easily undone by ethnographic intimacy. On the contrary, something widely recognized as global capitalism persists despite that kind of deconstructive work. Thus, at the same time that ethnography can and should be used to complicate the apparently smooth surface of things, it can and should also work in a complementary analytic direction. Ethnography can trace the processes through which complexity and contingency are often so effectively mustered into capitalist projects, as well as the accumulation, dispossession, and retrenchment of intersubjective difference that reliably accompany them. To use ethnography in this way allows us to attend to capitalism’s simultaneity—uneven, heterogeneous, and contested, yes—but at the same time proliferative, powerful, and (dare I say) systemic. Holding these analytic poles in tension, as equally empirically true in the world, asks us to account for their copresence. How is it that both can be true? The short answer is that, like any project, capitalism’s coherence and momentum take work; here, this means the linking and aligning of multiple messy projects through which systematicity can emerge.

Where ethnography has long paid productive attention to the disruptions and incoherences that accrete around and within capitalist projects, ethnographic methods also enable us to follow the work through which formalizations like economic theory come to have felicitous effects in the world. The resource curse, in this case, reached far beyond the HR manager’s account of his work into Equatoguinean state development plans, IMF recommendations, and popular comparisons with Nigeria and Gabon. Following these emergent formalizations brings critical attention not only to the scandals that saturate capitalism’s daily life (not least in the global oil industry and not least in sub-Saharan Africa), but also to *the licit life of capitalism*: practices that have become

legally sanctioned, widely replicated, and ordinary even as they are messy, contested and, to many, morally indefensible. This attention to the licit undertakes an anthropology of capitalism that proceeds not (or not only) from a sociology of error but from the question of how what currently exists has been stabilized (Roitman 2014, 78; see also de Goede 2005). Rather than only a (mis)representation to be deconstructed, capitalism is a constant construction project to be traced through research.

The oil industry is a particularly generative site in which to do this work. Oil has in common with capitalism the analytic privilege of being deemed more suitable as explanatory referent than ethnographic object. Like capitalism, oil is often conceived as metonymic context—oil is money; oil is geopolitics; oil is modernity—rather than an ongoing project available for ethnographic inquiry. This shared quality folds over on itself when oil and capitalism are theorized as co-constitutive. Analysts of all stripes will point to oil's \$6 trillion annual market value to pose it as the world's most important commodity or note that, because the global oil trade is denominated in dollars, oil's spectacular profits provide liquidity to financial markets while, reciprocally, the spectacular amount of up-front capital required to extract increasingly inaccessible hydrocarbon deposits means that finance capital enables contemporary extraction. Here oil and capitalism are conflated, both empirically as constitutive of one another and analytically as objects that are not also subjects. This conflation works to encircle and enclose our economic imaginations as well: in both oil and capitalism and in oil capitalism, we fear that *there is no alternative*, or, alternatives are constantly deferred. Let's agree to know that both oil and capitalism are projects not contexts, that neither oil nor capitalism can give a mirrored account of the other, and that both have immanent alternatives.

The HR manager's gesture of passing me McSherry's article was redolent with qualities often thought to be intrinsic to capitalism itself: abstraction, replicability, and the disembedding of economic interaction from social context. In contrast, the view from fourteen months of fieldwork in and around Equatorial Guinea's oil and gas industry demonstrated nothing more than the tremendous amount of work required to produce tenuous and contested approximations of those ostensibly intrinsic qualities. And yet, analysis can't rest there. (Aha! Capitalism doesn't work as it claims to!) Resource-curse theory is as productive as it is inaccurate. These are the simultaneities that ethnography can access and the constitutive tensions that generate capitalism's daily life—that re-authorize it but also contain the potential to reimagine it.

References

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