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Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place

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discourse. Whereas we have pursued the tack of developing a language of “diverse class relations” as a way of making visible the multiple capitalist and noncapitalist economic and noneconomic flows that constitute a social landscape (Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000, 2001), Yang employs a concept of “economic hybridity.” She argues that this notion allows for the interaction in an undetermined way of multiple and competing logics (emanating from, for example, the peasant ritual economy, the market economy, or various production economies) and the creation of a system in which fragmentation and dissonance function alongside integration and unity.

What Yang confronts in her search for new conceptual vocabularies with which to speak of economic hybridity is the lingering influence of economic determinism even in those thinkers such as Bataille who saw themselves as offering critiques of political economy. The very terms “system,” “logic,” and “economic compulsion” resonate with conceptions of self-regulation, directionality, and necessity that threaten to undermine the quest for new antiteleological ways of thinking about the economy. Yet the link to Bataille is also extraordinarily productive. His ebullient and confrontive focus on “ancient economy’s inextricable entanglement in the realm of the sacred” prompts us to consider how modern economic thinking has tamed and distanced the sacred and what is usually associated with it—the emotive and affective registers of life and “wasteful” excesses of expenditure on ritual, celebration, and festival.

Political economic discourse has traditionally employed the productive/unproductive distinction as an accounting mechanism for distinguishing those activities that are deemed as generating new value and growth in the economic system from those that are “merely” a drain on created value. The origin of this invidious calculative frame is entangled with the rise of liberalism and the elevation of secular practices and the public sphere of reason and morality over sacred rituals and the private realm of kin, feeling, obligation, and visceral experience (Connolly 1999). That economic discourse mirrored the cultural valuations and devaluations occurring in political theory during the Enlightenment is not surprising if we take a Foucauldian genealogical perspective. What is interesting is to calculate some of the effects of this demarcation and derogation of “unproductive” expenditure on our conceptions of economic possibility, just as William Connolly is exploring the limiting effects of the secularists’ devaluation and demotion of the visceral register, the sacred, and the emotive upon postmodern political possibilities.

Yang’s challenging and evocative paper suggests many ways of thinking about the enabling effects of extravagant expenditure, the “efficacy of generosity in sacrifice,” and the capacities of a community “ablaze with pleasant memories for months to come.” This wonderful discussion of Wenzhou prompts us to speculate on the ways in which noncapitalocentric discourses of economic diversity and visions of economic

possibility might be energized and expanded by a closer “economic” reading of pleasure, spirituality, and performances of excess.

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This exceedingly interesting paper takes as its starting point J. K. Gibson-Graham’s exhortation to find new theoretical languages to explain capitalism’s supposed triumph without reproducing the self-justificatory narratives of its inevitability and global dominance. Yang crafts such a theoretical language, using tools derived from Bataille, Baudrillard, and Bakhtin and through an insightful and nuanced analysis of apparently “irrational” ritual expenditures in Wenzhou, a region often touted in the press as a success story of capitalism and free markets in the “new China.” Specifically, Yang develops two models. One is a model of ritual expenditure that attends to the sacralization of the putatively economic. It is meant to address the shortcomings of other models of peasant economies, the author arguing that peasant economies are never, strictly speaking, merely economic. The other is a model of economic hybridity that directly answers Gibson-Graham’s call for a critique of global capitalism as all-conquering and capitalist economic development as a one-way street. This model is meant to address the shortcomings of the articulation-of-modes-of-production models of an earlier moment in economic anthropology.

While we wholeheartedly endorse the project of the paper and are convinced by the fine analysis here, we have two minor queries about the models presented, queries that have more to do with the author’s sources of theoretical inspiration than with her subtle use of them. Our comments derive from our concern that such new analyses of capitalisms and economic hybridity not simply turn into—or be misread as—old modernization theories. We offer them in the spirit of exploring the rich theoretical landscapes Yang presents.

First, we question whether Bataille’s vision of capitalism is not itself caught in capitalism’s self-mythologization as a desacralized and productivist space. Interestingly, Yang draws most directly from Bataille rather than from Mauss, from whom Bataille derived his analysis. We quibble with the suggestion that postmodern consumerism “is still in the service of production and productive accumulation, since every act of consumption in the world of leisure, entertainment, media, fashion, and home décor merely feeds back into the growth of the economy rather than leading to the finality and loss of truly *nonproductive* expenditure.” As Mauss argued, one who engages in the ritual consumption and even destruction of objects of economic value, rather than serving the interests of production, is in fact pur-

chasing prestige in the eyes of a community of other consumers.

To take just one striking example, in 1925, the same year that Mauss published *Essai sur le don*, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1953) offered one of the greatest tributes to the potlatch in all of American literature, *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby, in the economic expansion of the Jazz Age, buys an enormous mansion and throws lavish parties every night for a summer to try to raise his social stature in the eyes of Daisy, whose voice, famously, “sounds like money.” Of course, the ritual, even magical, fetishism of commodities had already been observed by Marx in the 1850s. Gatsby’s consumption, furthermore, is performative; it constructs his identity, not unlike the “distinctive feature” of the economy that Yang identifies in rural Wenzhou that works toward the “reconstitution of local kinship relations and structures.” This sacred and exuberant quality of consumption, inscribed into American literature by Fitzgerald in the 1920s, troubles the periodization implicit in Bataille and in Yang’s extrapolation of his argument of there being distinct precapitalist, capitalist, and postmodern capitalist formations following one another in time and tied to varying degrees of desacralization. Gatsby, we suggest, both foretells and disrupts the forward and backward temporal narratives of modernization theory.

Second, Yang makes good use of Bakhtin, but we worry about the slippage between the linguistic and the biological notion of hybridity. We believe that Bakhtin’s notion of hybridity works for the register of speech, where we can imagine a room of people shouting or debating, but *not* for the register of biology and speciation. For the latter, the metaphor too easily slips into the classificatory grids of separate bodies and body types and permits too ready an acceptance of a vision of transformation and mutation linked to reproductive couplings. For example, in the moments in the essay where Yang refers to “archaic,” “ancient,” or “precapitalist” economic formations, she seems caught in the speciation model of hybridity, which presumes bounded (economic) bodies which can then mutually penetrate, for example, to create new hybrids. In defending the ritual practices that she observes in Wenzhou against charges that they may have been co-opted into postmodern consumerism, Yang does not escape the paradigm; she reproduces it by calling them archaic. Emphasizing the linguistic notion of hybridity gets around the problem of positing species by foregrounding the arena of utterances.

In much the same way, Yang’s striking imagery (via Grosz) of the “gay male body” as “both penetrator and penetrated”—“enabl[ing] us to envision economic encounters in modernity as a process of *mutual*, albeit not necessarily equal, penetration”—might preserve the directionality and temporality of modernization theory. Bodies, human ones at least, have a front and a back, and mutual penetration does not have to be but is nevertheless often enough actually sequential penetration. Mutual penetration can easily become a possibility, however, when one breaks with the reproductivist logic that assumes all erotic activity to involve the kind of coupling

from which speciation springs. Here we follow Yang’s crucial insight that, in order to contest the vision of capitalism as monolithic and cohesive, we must “move toward a notion of capitalism as an open-ended, mutating process made up of disparate and conflicting elements, some of which harbor the potential to derail its forces and harness them in new directions.” Perhaps, then, the metaphor of the gay male body needs to be supplemented with the metaphor of the Catacombs, the arena of unbounded bodies and complexly rendered relations described by Gayle Rubin (1991), where insides and outsides get confounded and redefined in the enactment of new pleasures and powers.

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Yang’s “Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place” provides a bold, provocative argument about local cultural autonomy, subversions of “global capitalism,” and the complexities of socioeconomic and cultural transformations in contemporary China. Yang proposes an original concept, “economic hybridity,” that we might use to critique assumptions about a uniform capitalism, and, in the spirit of Sahlins, she stresses the capacity of local culture to resist and rework the incursions of what she interchangeably calls Western or global capitalism. Her essay certainly points in the direction that several anthropologists have sought to go in recent years—developing ethnographically rich accounts that might challenge a framework of “global capitalism” that seems at once overarching, homogenizing, and universalizing. I engage with it at several key points: (1) tropes of place and locality, (2) issues of power and inequality, and (3) the category of global or Western capitalism.

Yang’s title evokes Appadurai’s (1988) groundbreaking “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place.” Appadurai taught us to be wary of cultural tropes that stand in for places, which reveal as much about the histories of power embedded in our representations as they do about the places being described. He and others have encouraged us to analyze these constructions of place rather than assume them. Yang, too, is concerned with culture and place. Taking inspiration from Gibson-Graham she searches for an “outside” to capitalism that might help us conceptualize resistance inside our critiques of capitalism. Gibson-Graham’s spatial metaphor is not tied to place; the “outside” to capitalism in this framework is found in activities. But for Yang, ritual expenditure is tied to a “local” culture that stands outside of a capitalism that is located tropically in the West. What exactly is “local” about the revitalization of lineages and ancestor worship, festivals, and funerals in Wenzhou? Surely not the fact that they occur only in Wenzhou (as Yang acknowledges, they occur throughout rural China). And if not only in Wenzhou, then we would not want to pose (as Yang does not) a “local” Chinese culture of lineage mentality against a “global” Western one in which kinship is irrelevant.