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NEWSLETTER 2024/2 SEPTEMBER

IN FOCUS

AnthEcon Business Meeting

Our online network meeting will be held on Wednesday, September 4th, 2024, at 17:00 CET ([Zoom meeting link](#)). Among other things, we will select new members of the convening team and thank our outgoing convenors (Andreas, Juliane, and Michele) for their important work over the past 4 years. We hope to see as many members as possible at the meeting!

EASA 2024: The Anthropology of Economy Network Panels

Between the 23rd and 26th of July, we met in Barcelona for the 18th Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), themed "Doing and Undoing with Anthropology." This exciting event featured a diverse program that explored the cutting edge of anthropological research and practice.

One of the highlights of the conference was the series of panels sponsored by the EASA Anthropology of Economy Network. These panels delved into key issues shaping our world today and offer unique insights from leading scholars in the field. Here are short reports from the four panels we sponsored:

- **Illegitimacy and informality in the digital economy (convened by Margie Cheesman; Andreas Hackl)**

Our panel explored diverse perspectives across various world regions and contexts: Lebanon, Jordan, Kenya, Somalia, Colombia, Brazil, Myanmar, and China. Key topics included digital money, live-streaming, online lending, gig work, and financial influencers on social media. Ethnographic approaches moved the conversation beyond state-centric, legalistic, and criminalising perspectives on legitimate economic activity. Rather than ascribing fixed roles to participants (scammer vs scammed, buyer vs seller, exploiter vs exploited), panelists revealed a range of subject positions, motivations, moral codes, and structural barriers connected with informal practices. It emerged that practices characterised as illegitimate or informal have distinct formalities and norms, for example, as social trust translates into the digital age. Technologies and techniques, both digital and analogue, mediate economic relationships. Here, social media pages influence fintech users, and discriminatory identity checks shape refugees' and gig workers' everyday use of platforms. Ultimately, the panel opened up a conversation about the diverse ways in which informality can be characterised: as survival tactics, 'stateless commerce', responses to exclusion, and political resistance, but also as creative hustling, gambling, and play. The panel organisers (Margie and Andreas) plan to organise a special issue bringing together the panelists and others interested in contributing to this conversation.

- **Unveiling inequality and (un)doing ethnography of datified capitalism (convened by Marie Kolling and Sofie Henriksen)**

The panel explored critical approaches to contemporary datified capitalism through ethnographic cases spanning crypto farms in Iceland, fintech in Brazil, the Czech platformised delivery sector, corporate humanitarianism in Silicon Valley, Wikipedia editors, and young social media users. The papers discussed extractive and speculative corporate practices as well as subjective practices as people navigate digital terrains between empowerment and surveillance. The papers highlighted the new subjectivities that emerge in data-driven societies and the societal impacts of producing or reinforcing inequalities and unsustainable environmental consequences. The papers oscillated between data optimism or data pessimism, tracing how these imaginaries converge in open, messy, unfinished, and complex ways, as pointed out by the panel discussant, Moisés Kopper. Finally, the papers also addressed methodological and ethical challenges of researching the "black box" of algorithmic decisions and digital infrastructures, particularly within corporations that have little interest or incentive to engage with anthropological inquiries, and how varying power relations affect our research and might require new approaches.

- **Black hands, green jobs: unpacking decarbonization through green labour (convened by Theodora Vetta and Rune Bennike)**

In 2019 ILO estimated a loss of 8 million jobs across sectors such as coal-mining and coal-fired electricity production, but also a gross gain of 26 million new "green jobs" in the efforts to mitigate climate crisis. However, our panel, contributing to the growing critical literature on labour and the "green transition," clearly illustrated the highly uneven character of these job regimes, often retracing - sadly foreseeable - colonial, gendered, and racialised paths of exploitation and expropriation. The panelists' presentations included fine-grained ethnographic explorations of the labours involved in a digitally mediated, carbon off-setting, tree-planting project in China, the gendered and seasonal character of labour in the offshore wind power supply chain in France and the UK, and the local political economies of "green reskilling" in a decarbonising coal mining region in Greece. They made it clear that green labour comes with different collars and go beyond the formal sphere of the workplace. Based on the productive discussions on the panel, we plan to organise next year a publication-oriented follow-up workshop, bringing together the panelists and others interested in contributing to this conversation.

- **Doing and undoing (with) the anthropology of infrastructure (convened by Ognjen Kojanić, Uri Ansenberg, and Elias Strand)**

Our panel engaged with the flourishing of research on infrastructure in anthropology. Our panelists embodied the dynamism of this rapidly growing subfield of anthropology by presenting examples of various infrastructural systems (energy, waste, transport, water supply, libraries, etc.) and located in diverse geographies (from the capital of Madagascar to the Haitian-Dominican border, from coalfields of northern Greece to precarious settlements in Rio de Janeiro, from Croatian islands to the Peruvian Andes, and many others). One of the main topics of theorisation that emerged in the discussion is how infrastructure serves as a domain in which communities negotiate their expectations from capital and the state, and how large-scale actors engage with those expectations related to infrastructure as they seek economic growth and to establish or solidify their power. Furthermore, a vibrant discussion emerged around the important question of the extent to which people should be seen as infrastructure, in which the panelists worked on defining the boundaries around the concepts of "people as infrastructure," "human infrastructure," and "social infrastructure." We are looking forward to continuing these conversations and have tentative plans for a follow-up publication of a special issue.

PERSPECTIVES, NOTES AND QUERIES

14.4 Million and the New Class of Top Managers

On 28 March 2024, the Swiss megabank UBS announced its plan to offer a remuneration package of 14.4 million Swiss francs (Eu 14.7M, USD 15.9M) to its new CEO, Sergio Ermotti, for his first nine months (!) on the job. Ermotti, a well-known top manager, assumed the CEO position after UBS acquired its former main competitor, Credit Suisse. It did so with the assistance of the Swiss government, which said that it would cover up to nine billion Swiss francs of UBS risk arising from the acquisition, a measure reminiscent of the massive government bailouts during the 2008 financial crisis. In Switzerland, the decision to pay 14.4 millions to the manager of a bank, whose recent success was at least partly based on government support, sparked controversy regarding why managers like Ermotti are paid so much and how their work can be deemed so valuable.

Neoliberal proponents have justified such salaries by citing 'international market competition' for top managers and the 'great responsibility' that they bear. However, as anthropologists we must scrutinize what these managers actually do and why their work appears indispensable in the current economic framework. In 2019 I defined management as 'a mode of governing people or things in accordance with economic ideas and rationales' (Leins 2019: 91). As evidenced by the work of scholars such as [Kimberly Chong](#), [Andrew Orta](#), [Emil Raynyuk](#) and [Felix Stein](#), management practices have come to be seen as pivotal to the contemporary organization of the economy, ranging from small-scale personal management to the activities of transnational business consultants. Managers are taken to enforce economic efficiency and, as Chong aptly demonstrates in her *Best Practice*, they also play a role in assuming responsibility for success and deflecting responsibility for failure.

What is intriguing about the ascendancy of managers in the present economy is that it necessitates a re-evaluation of power structures within capitalism. If we begin with Marx's distinction between workers and capitalists, top managers present an exceptional case. Technically they are workers, not capitalists. For instance, Ermotti is an employee of UBS, although likely he also is paid partially in UBS shares, which makes him an owner as well. Nevertheless, he probably identifies less with the struggles of average workers and more with the interests of large capital. Ermotti and the emerging class of top managers thus inhabit a position somewhere between workers and capitalists, which illustrates how this simple dichotomy does not adequately capture the complexities of contemporary capitalism.

Currently, a number of anthropologists are exploring the concept of management and the role of managers through ethnography. This inquiry is not only pertinent to understanding the economy but also crucial for understanding things like new forms of state bureaucracy, as well as university management. In these and other spheres, managers end up defining what is efficient and valuable, and hence indispensable. At UBS, Ermotti will be instrumental in shaping the future direction of the bank. His influence, along with that of other managers, warrants scrutiny in economic anthropology.

Stefan Leins, University of Bern

If you want to reply to this column, or if you want to write a column or have an idea for one, please communicate with James G. Carrier: jgc.carrier@gmail.com

CALL FOR PAPERS

Economic Anthropology "New Directions"

Economic Anthropology is now soliciting submissions for "New Directions", a special section of our annual open issue which will consist of 2000-word peer-reviewed pieces focused on redirecting or expanding citation chains in and around anthropological scholarship. This series is part of the journal's larger strategy to acknowledge and address citational politics within the discipline. Each piece in "New Directions" should take as its topic a line of thinking in any field of anthropological or related scholarship that the author thinks needs a break from orthodoxy. For example, a topic could be (but is not limited to):

- The origin and/or development of a theoretical concept;
- The treatment of a geographic area or group of people;
- The development of standard practices around methods or data analysis; the ethical conduct of research; or the training of researchers/scholars;
- A school of thought or institutional context for scholarship;
- Anthropology's or anthropologists' relationship with another discipline, group of scholars, or way of thinking; or
- How anthropology changes given new ethical or political commitments.

Once an author has identified a topic they should draft a submission that is around 2000 words which does the following:

- Identifies a current literature, genealogy, and/or citation chain ("Line 1") that provides an epistemic bedrock for an area of scholarship;
- Illustrates alternative literatures, genealogies, and/or citation chains that can, could, or should replace or work in parallel to Line 1; and
- Explains how a given area of scholarship can, could, or would be changed by the embrace of alternative lines of knowledge.

We are currently soliciting submissions for a special section which will appear in our January 2026 open issue. To be considered for this issue, pieces should be submitted to Economic Anthropology by January 17th, 2025. Authors should note in their cover page that they are submitting to "New Directions." All pieces will go through Economic Anthropology's standard, rigorous peer review process and should be written in Economic Anthropology's standard format which can be seen in our submission guidelines [here](#).

Dr. Jess Beck will be the editor of this special section and can be reached at jess.beck@ucl.ac.uk.

Public Anthropologist's Special Issue "Positioning, Militancy and Public engagement"

In the past few decades, social and cultural anthropology has engaged in a critical debate on researcher's positioning. There is a growing consensus on the necessity for researchers to be fully aware of the theoretical and methodological perspectives from which they conduct fieldwork, as well as the subjectivity involved, encompassing attitudes, experiences, expectations, and values. In this context, we invite anthropologists to explore the relationship between positioning (understood as an exercise in reflexivity by the researcher on the perspectives, questions, and values they bring to the field) and two other concepts that are sometimes conflated with it: researcher's militancy and public engagement. By militancy, we refer to the active participation of researchers in an organization, party, or social movement, as well as their intimate adherence to a worldview that they identify with and that informs their lifestyle. Public engagement, on the other hand, can be defined as the ability to consistently disseminate research outcomes in the public sphere, lead participatory approaches, inform more dialogic teaching methods, and engage at different levels with the multiplicity of research subjects and stakeholders.

We call for papers that will help clarify both the distinctions and interactions between these three "angles," using field research examples. The questions we pose include, but are not limited to:

- How does militancy interact with positioning? Is militancy (always) a resource, or does it risk undermining the researcher's critical reflexivity on positioning? Can the researcher's militancy compromise research outcomes and diminish scientific authority?
- How does militancy interact with public engagement activities? If public engagement requires a certain degree of compromises and forms of mediation (linked to the need to address a wide audience an different stakeholders) is militancy always reconcilable with it?
- Can strong critical positioning (and thus the ability to understand the reliability and partiality of one's viewpoint) lead researchers to be skeptical of totalizing affiliations and the plausibility of public engagement as a neutral tool for scientific dissemination?

For questions regarding the special issue, contact angela.biscaldi@unimi.it.

For questions regarding the journal, contact the Editor-in-Chief, Antonio De Lauri, antonio.delauri@cmi.no.

"Anthropologies of Eurasia" Book Series

CEU Press has launched a new book series: Anthropologies of Eurasia. Ethnographic Encounters of Social Change. This new scholarly book series showcases work that has as its thematic interest social change. This reflects the everyday lives of peoples from the Eurasian landmass, many of whom have experienced post socialist transformation over the last three decades. As an all-encompassing theme, 'social change' refers to a broad range of economic, political and social dynamics: the way communities are transformed by mobility and migration; the economic practices and political reforms that shape daily engagements; and the cultural (including religious) conflicts and collaborations that take place in everyday life.

Alongside this thematic focus, the Series has a methodological commitment to prioritizing an in-depth knowledge of the region, work grounded in empirical research and detailed local knowledge. Such an ethnographic (participant observation) approach, traditionally and enduringly central to the domain of the anthropological discipline, has also been adopted - in modified form - by scholars from related disciplines including: human geography, history, sociology, politics amongst others. Anthropologies of Eurasia provides a platform for all scholars, from anthropology and related social science and humanities disciplines, whose studies are based on the intimate knowledge of the society about which they write.

For more information, please contact Jen McCall, Acquisitions Editor (History), CEU Press

at McCallJ@press.ceu.edu.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS



Johanna Mugler et al. (eds.), 2024. *Anthropology and Tax. Ethnographies of Fiscal Relation*. Cambridge University Press.

From the perspective of individual taxpayers to international tax norm negotiators, the anthropologists in this collection explore how taxes shape our world: our social relationships and value regimes, how we exclude and include, the categories we think with, and the way we share with each other. A first of its kind, it presents an anthropological discussion about tax rooted in ethnographic work. It asks fundamental questions such as: what is tax, what is taxable, and what do taxes do? By forwarding multiple perspectives from around the world about fiscal systems and how they are experienced and constituted, *Anthropology and Tax* reconceptualises tax in society. In doing so, this volume makes an incisive intervention in what might be one of the most important debates of our time – that of fiscal sociality.

The volume is freely available from the publisher's website.

ISBN 9781009254588
<https://www.cambridge.org/gb/universitypress/subjects/law/taxation-law/anthropology-and-tax-ethnographies-fiscal-relations>



Alimardanian, Mahnaz and Timothy Heffernan (eds.), 2024. *The anthropology of ambiguity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

This volume puts ambiguity and its generative power at the centre of analytical attention. Rather than being cast negatively as a source of confusion, bewilderment or as a dangerous portent, ambiguity is held as the source of the dynamic between knowledge and experience and of certainty amid uncertainty. It positions human life between the realms of mystery and mastery where ambiguity is understood as the experience and expression of life and part of navigating the human condition. In turn, the tension between the tradition in anthropology of examining cultural certitudes through ethnographic description and efforts to challenge dominant expressions of incertitude are explored. Each chapter presents ethnographic accounts of how people engage individually and collectively with the self, the other, human-made institutions and the more-than-human to navigate ambiguity in a world affected by viral contagion, climate change, economic instability, labour precarity and (geo)political tension.

ISBN 9781526173850
<https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526173843/the-antropology-of-ambiguity/>



Hann, Chris, and Deborah James (eds.), 2024. *One Hundred Years of Argonauts: Ethnography and Economic Anthropology*. Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books

Malinowski's Argonauts of the Western Pacific was a major contribution to anthropological theory and method, while simultaneously establishing the sub-field of economic anthropology. Even a century after its publication, Malinowski's pioneering work remains critical for anthropology in a postcolonial age. This volume uses ethnographic studies from around the world to contextualize the work politically and intellectually, examining its gestation and influence from multiple perspectives. It critically explores the meaning of "economy" for Malinowski from his formation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to his path-breaking fieldwork in Melanesia and ensuing career in London.

ISBN 978-1-80539-521-8
<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/HannOne>

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Fontefrancesco, M. F., (2023). Opportunistic media and information literacy: A case study of the implementation of E-Commerce in the food retail sector in Italy, in Jaakkola, M. T. O. (ed.), *Media and information literacy for the public good: UNESCO MILID Yearbook 2023*. UNINUNUTO, Bologna 2023: 219-238. DOI: [10.1080/21661392.2024.2346304](https://doi.org/10.1080/21661392.2024.2346304)

Wiegatz, J., Salverda, T., and Lanzano C. (eds.) (2024). Moral economies of capitalism in Africa. *Critical African Studies* 16 (special issue). DOI: [10.1080/21661392.2024.2346304](https://doi.org/10.1080/21661392.2024.2346304)

The Anthropology of Economy network was launched at the 2012 conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. The Network unites EASA members who share an interest in the anthropology of economy. Further information on the AOE Network: <https://www.eassonline.org/network/economy>

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AOE Network Newsletter 2024/2 was set by Ognjen Kojanić

