

# **Invisible Hands of Life: Alternate Modes of Prosperity**

Edited by  
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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

*The handshake seals the contract from the contract  
There's no turning back  
The turning point of a career in Korea, being insincere  
The holiday was fun packed  
The contract still intact.*

*Depeche Mode - Everything counts*

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<sup>1</sup> This collection is the outcome of a panel entitled *Invisible Hands: Alternate modes of prosperity, wealth, and well-being* that was held at the 2014 ASA Decennial Conference at the University of Edinburgh. The conference main theme invited participants to reflect on anthropology's intimate relation to the Enlightenment, especially to Scottish Enlightenment thinkers of which Adam Smith is amongst the most prominent. The editors would like to thank the conference organisers as well as panellists, in particular, Ellen Judd, Stephen McConnachie, Shu-Yuan Yang and Liz Ravalde for their stimulating papers and comments. Responsibility for the ideas expressed herein remains ours alone. Retsikas would like to acknowledge the generosity of the ESRC (RES-062-23-2639) in supporting the research which this introduction draws upon, and Marsden would like to extend his gratitude to European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research & Innovation Program 669132-TRODITIES Yiwu: Trust, Global Traders, and Commodities in a Chinese International City.

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a renewed interest in the themes of value and prosperity in anthropology (Otto & Willersev 2013; Graeber 2001; Lambek 2008; Robbins and Siikala 2014; Tsing 2013). In the process, questions of wealth, good fortune, and the attainment of happiness in the present and the future have occupied a central place (Coleman 2004; da Col 2012; da Col & Humphrey 2012; Corsín Jiménez 2008; Johnston 2012). Undeniably such questions have been at the heart of social and political economy theory since their very inception. Yet more recently, the devastating effects of the financial crisis of 2008 in Europe and America and the varied but nevertheless widespread effect this has had across the globe, have invested scholarly debates over the source of value and the prospective mechanisms of prosperity creation with a new found urgency and significance. In Part III of HAU's double issue on Life, entitled *Invisible hands of life: alternate modes of prosperity*, we aim to critically revisit some of the key postulates informing contemporary processes of value multiplication by pointing out their far from universal character. We seek to exemplify their contingent and particular status by elaborating on alternate modes of well-being attested in an array of ethnographic investigations into unfamiliar systems of value and unacquainted mechanisms for the generation of prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

Our entry point into such debates is Adam's Smith's concept of the 'invisible hand'. In its current use in economic theory and the popular imagination, Adam Smith's modest use of the concept in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) has been transformed into a powerful catchphrase of the benefits of market competition. As such, it is often evoked by liberals as the transcendental element of economics par excellence, acting to promote both individual and collective prosperity and ensuring that justice and fairness are delivered to all. The current collection aims to explore critically the 'imagination' that has given rise to this particular understanding of affluence. We do not however mean to merely repeat those critiques of neoliberalism that have been such a central feature of much anthropological thought and debate in recent years (Elyachar 2005; Greenhouse 2010; Li 2007). Nor, indeed, is the ethnographic focus of this special section on the type of socio-economic groups that are most frequently thought of as offering insights into the nature of being prosperous in the contemporary world – the expanding urban middle classes of postcolonial societies.<sup>3</sup> Instead, we wish to build on Marshall Sahlins' valuable insights in *The Original Affluent Society* (1972), re-launching an inquiry into modes of conceiving, achieving, and demonstrating abundance, prosperity and multiplication that do not fit within the narrow confines of neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

All the papers collected are based on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of settings - Syria, Mali, Hawaii, Indonesia, Jordan - and provide rich empirical studies of the diverse ways in which human beings, in various historical and cultural circumstances, have and continue to seek to bring about amplex and plenitude in their lives. In particular, the papers bring to vivid attention the multiplicity of devices and tools, as well as models, procedures and strategies that particular societies and cultures have invented and developed for the purpose of achieving abundance. Challenging the current tendency in economics and beyond to speak

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<sup>2</sup> We are aware that it is all too easy to identify practices of forms of behaviour as being 'alternative' that are in fact closely related if not derivative of the very modes of doing things deemed conventional or ordinary (cf. Maurer 2005). Importantly, we refer in the volume to 'alternate' rather than 'alternative' modes of prosperity precisely because 'alternate' indexes multiplicity not only in relationship to an opposing form, but in a manner that recognises change, transformation, and contingency as the fundamental aspect of 'being'.

<sup>3</sup> There is of course an extensive body of work on the importance of prosperity to the self-understandings of 'the middle classes' in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

<sup>4</sup> An extensive body of work in anthropology and related disciplines has simultaneously challenged and enhanced Sahlins' original study. For a seminal critique see Bird-David (1992).

about prosperity in monetary, quantitative terms, while equating market prices with abstract values, we present critical analyses of the actual workings of value multiplication in concrete social settings. As such the papers successfully by-pass and escape any *a priori*, economic determinisms of social worth. In particular, they focus on how modes of achieving prosperity long recognised in particular regions, such as through child birth and multiple marriage, have retained or been divested of their significance today<sup>5</sup>. They also address the ways in which strategies deployed for achieving prosperity, such as education and foreign travel, build as much on local values as on neo-liberal risk culture. And they ask how particular re-interpretations of religious doctrine such as prosperity theology have gained momentum amongst the faithful, often alongside the market and commodity transactions. At the same time, they are all particularly concerned with thinking critically about the presuppositions prosperity devices involve, the values they are informed by, and the modes of sociality they uphold.

The present collection is at pains to avoid falling into the trap of dualistic thinking and its method of theory making, involving the setting up of analytical distinctions such as those between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘gift exchange’ and ‘commodity exchange’, ‘capitalist’ and ‘primitive’ economies. All the ethnographic cases collected are taken from societies and cultures with deep histories of intense, multi-stranded connections with a variety of other societies and cultures, all of which have been reshaped and reconstituted by the forces of colonialism and capitalism over the past few centuries. Our contribution to theory comes instead from the re-invigoration of ethnography as a culture critique, that is, the foregrounding of ethnographic description as a key practice, intellectual as well as political, in the ongoing project of the trans-valuation of all values, and of conceiving life anew.

## **Hands of Prosperity**

For Adam Smith, the founder of political economy, prosperity is created on account of three key principles: human labour, contractual exchange, and non-human automatisms. In his classic *An Inquest into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (2007) he argues,

‘Labour alone, therefore, next varying in its own value, is alone and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only’ (2007: 25).

Smith’s labour theory of value goes back to Sir William Petty’s 17<sup>th</sup> century writings, and was carried forward by Karl Marx’s 19<sup>th</sup> century rendering of capitalism as alienation (2010). As such, it is part and parcel of a long-standing philosophical cum ethical quest to determine what matters most in life: in the Western tradition, the most usual answer has been the appeal to human effort, complemented by an equal emphasis on contractual modes of interaction, especially from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Kahn 2004). If, for Smith and others, incessant labour defines mankind as worthy because it is productive, industrious, and diligent in meeting its needs, which are allegedly many, exchange carried out on the basis of contractual mutuality ensures that the circulation of goods is such that it does not demean its dignity. It is precisely because Smith conceives of exchange as a ‘natural’ by-product of the ‘necessary’ division of

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<sup>5</sup> We also have in mind Miers and Kypotoff’s (1977) notion of ‘wealth in people’, articulated with reference to Equatorial Africa. For critiques of this notion see Gyuer (1993, 1995).

labour (2007: 13) that he is at pains to outline the most appropriate method for conducting it. In first place he considers appealing to benevolence and the goodwill of others. In contrast to Marcel Mauss's (2016) 20<sup>th</sup> century study, however, Smith dismisses the gift as unfitting: its promotion of servility and hierarchy he deems as being rather repulsive. Instead Smith appeals to self-interested exchange, as regulated by contractual agreements, for it is best in advancing equality and partnership.<sup>6</sup> To repeat an already famous quote,

‘Man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me what I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is the manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love.’ (2007: 13).

For Smith, market exchange amounts to a meeting of equals, extending further the dignity productive labour endows ‘men’ (as is the case in the respective period) with. Each man seeking ‘only his own gain’ is the default position. Yet to fully achieve maximum gain, man according to Smith, must join in the market so as to exchange what he owns or produces with others who sufficiently value what he has to offer, and who themselves own or have produced something he desires, and/or needs, in turn. This is a plateau in which a multitude of dyadic relations - separate, impersonal and transient - take place. And, it is precisely because such relations are unencumbered by pre-existing obligations such as those prevalent in the old Europe of feudal ties, and are moreover sterile of future connections that they furnish the most promising ground for the practice of a freedom appropriate to man as an individual producer/owner (see Foucault 2009: 48). In this regard, a second instantiation of value creation comes into play: the toiling hand of man the worker is complemented by the image of the shaking of hands, preferably a firm and committed one, sealing an exchange. The handshake is, in other words, the sign for the new, prosperous man of market contracts Smith so elegantly evokes.<sup>7</sup>

Smith however recognised that market exchange entails human as well as non-human constituents. While self-interested intentionality and the capacity for labour provided the necessary human in-puts for the attainment of prosperity, the institution of the market involved additional components and dynamics capable of engendering most significant outcomes outside of immediate human control. This is apparent in Smith's appeal to the third principle, with the image of an invisible, most definitely not-human, hand furnishing the transcendental dimension of prosperity generation. Smith presupposes that ‘an invisible hand’ automatically intervenes in the market process: acting as yet another *deus ex machina*, it miraculously resolves the ultimate ethical/social paradox posed by his thinking: how is it possible for acting in one's own self-interest not to undermine social peace, but instead promote common welfare? In crafting his answer, Smith carefully differentiates between planned, intentional sets of activities, on the

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<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion of the logic of Smith's ethical reasoning and its relationship to earlier theorists see Hirschman (1997).

<sup>7</sup> As Silver (1990) demonstrates, the other side of the manly handshake between trusting business partners, was the opening up of space for ‘friendships of sentiment’, a new type of relationship untainted by commercial strategy or practical necessity. More broadly see Rothschild (2002) on the relationship of Smith's theory of moral sentiments to his work on markets and prosperity.

one hand, and subject-less processes and agent-free automatisms that neoliberal economists would centuries' later rename as 'market efficiencies', on the other. According to economists such as Milton Friedman (1962), if each exchange partner is allowed to choose freely what and how to produce, exchange, and consume, the market itself will settle on an ideal price determination and income distribution that would be favourable to each and every member. To return to Smith, it is only the intention-less, yet purposeful action of 'an invisible hand' that effectuates the smooth synthesis of collective and individual well-being: the generation of abundance is both an indication of its operation and its direct effect.

'By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by *an invisible hand* to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good' (Smith 2007: 246; my emphasis).

## Trans-Valuating Values

In returning to the work of Smith in this volume, we ask the same question that countless anthropologists have before us posed: Where does the economic begin, and end? What counts as economic, and what as non-economic, when, and why? The impossibility of answering this basic question with an adequate degree of generality, let alone universality, points to the futility of differentiating in advance and for all occasions, 'physics' from 'metaphysics', 'values' from 'value', and 'goods' from 'the good'!<sup>8</sup> Recognising this impossibility opens up a new, more important and productive line of inquiry that was previously foreclosed: Where does the line of demarcation between the economic and the non-economic lie, and why? How, and when did such demarcation come about? How is it maintained? Which phenomena/concerns/practices are included, and which are excluded, from such category? How, and when, do leakages and outflows occur across categories, bringing about the collapse of such enclosures? Thanks to the pioneering work of Michael Callon (1998, 2007) and his concepts of performativity and assemblage, we are in better position to appreciate the immensity of resources and efforts that are been put into the making of the economy as a discrete domain, as well as the fragility and instability of the processes involved.

A complementary yet distinct strategy to Callon's social studies of science approach is to start from a *non-economistic concept of the economy*. To put it simply, a non-economistic

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<sup>8</sup> As Sahlins (1996) reminds us, Smith's invocation of the invisible hand, along with the discipline of economics it has given birth to, is well-embedded within a particular Judeo-Christian theological/metaphysical tradition that conceives of life in terms of a providential model, centring on a benevolent God-creator. Writing a century or so before Sahlins, Nietzsche (2003) had pointed out the productivity of such genealogical inquiry: in his case, it is the general embeddedness of market practices of exchanging promises and generating debt obligations within Judeo/Christian conceptions of divine Sovereignty over the creation, and attendant moral conceptions of human conscience and guilt that is emphasised. For a recent rejoinder of the debate, outlining some the complexities of the relation between economic values and ethical axioms see Lambek (2008).

concept of the economy involves working with an open-ended and unrestricted notion of prosperity generation and value multiplication that takes great reflexive pains in distancing itself from the presuppositions and premises that form the foundation of economics as science and practice.<sup>9</sup> This is the approach that the papers in this volume embrace. Such foundational assumptions are the valorisation of scarcity, exchange, and labour in the determination of value as economic, i.e. intrinsic and proper, rational and truthful. In particular, a non-economistic concept of the economy takes issue with an understanding of value as a determinant of scarcity: this is the great lesson we take away from Marshall Sahlins' classic treatise/manifesto, *The Original Affluent Society* (1972). To the extent that scarcity indicates the ratio of an evident inadequacy and unavoidable un-satisfaction permeating Life, it expresses the relation between desire and its actualisation as negative. Given that economic science conceives of human desire in terms of needs which are thought to be infinite, and the world as resources which are manifestly finite, it can only propagate Life as unappreciated as flawed and deficient. In this regard, it is worth noting the 'elective affinity' between classical/neo-classical economics and certain aspects of the Christian faith that downplay the joys, and pains, of this life in favour of a super-sensible world man may (re-) enter on condition of conducting him/herself in the here-and-now in a self-denying, ascetic manner. Of the two, however, it is economics that comes out worst: while for Christian ascetics, pleasure is momentarily postponed, for advocates of economic celibacy, it is forever deferred, remaining absolutely un-attainable.

The second break with economics, and much of economic anthropology, regards the capture and effective domestication of all kinds of diverse techniques of conducting value transfers to a contractarian conception of transactional life. Despite its presumed critical bend, starting with Mauss's decisive text (2016) on the gift, many anthropological descriptions of non-commodity transactions remain shackled to a narrow model of the social that is at least as old as Hobbes' and Rousseau's treatises on the subject: whether in the form of return-gifts or wages paid for labour time expended, the premises of reciprocity and equivalence pertain to key presuppositions. Victoria Kahn (2004) has located the emergence of such distinctively modern conception of obligation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the English civil war marking the beginning of a historical shift from away from the world of status to one regulated by contracts pertaining as much between the autonomous individuals of commodity exchange as between the sovereign and his/her subjects. As Graeber's (2001, 2011) recent critiques of economic theories of value show, this contractual perspective is very much still with us: both in academic and non-academic discussions, market exchange provides the dominant framework for understanding value's multiplication with the presupposition of equivalent returns being uncritically projected onto other forms of value transfers.

Karl Marx (2010), with his concepts of commodity fetishism and labour alienation, came close to problematizing this assumption; yet his position regarding equivalence retains an unmistakable ambiguity which is the source of problem we face, and the reason why the invention of a more radical critique is required. For Marx, alienation is inherent in the social relations of capitalism whereby commodity production is conducted on the basis of class divisions and the appropriation of the labour of workers by the class of capital owners. Marx writes that 'the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person' (1964: 171). However what remains uncertain is whether the wages workers receive in return for forfeiting their labour (and its products) are 'unjust' because they automatically

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<sup>9</sup> We fully acknowledge Parry and Bloch's (1989) seminal analysis in this respect, as well as Ingold's (2000) critique of the notion of economic man, on unpacking some of the key presuppositions informing political economy.

exclude workers from their share in surplus-value production, or if there is an insurmountable gap inherent in all and every exchange, make it impossible for wages and labour to act as mutually substitutable?<sup>10</sup> While most commentators lay emphasis on the injustices of capitalism, Perlman's (1968) proposes an interpretation of Marx that focuses on incommensurability by pointing out that wages and labour (or as Perlman reconfigures it, 'creative power') are different kinds of value, and thus non-substitutable by definition. In this regard, Perlman observes that in capitalism, 'the producer alienates his creative power, in fact, he sells it to the capitalist, and what he gets in exchange is different in kind from that creative power; in exchange for the creative power he gets things [money to buy commodities with]' (1968: 7). It is apparent that creativity is a more expansive concept than labour, referring to a broad-spectrum capacity or potency to do or achieve the new and the unexpected, inclusive of breaking with habits and reconfiguring conducts. As the unlimited potential of an infinite generativity, it corresponds to the ultimate value itself, rather than to a relative value: as such, it is not subject to the demands of commodity production and to capture by monetary terms, as labour unavoidably gets to be.

At the same time, the ethnographic record contains of a good many instances in which value is transferred and prosperity is accomplished by methods involving neither stipulated returns nor future obligations. A case in point is the 'sharing' or 'demand sharing' practiced by contemporary hunter-gather societies: a growing number of ethnographers (including Woodburn (1998), Gell (1999), and Widlok (2013)) argue that sharing's *sui generis* status is partly based on its denial of two-way reciprocal transfers. In particular, Widlok defines 'sharing food and drink as an action done *for its own sake*, putting the good of nourishment in the place of any specific goals [...], for instance the attempt to create obligations in the future' (2013: 16). He also shows that its practice has nothing to do with the altruistic automatisms of a 'baseline communism' for it is both a complex performance and an unpredictable undertaking that does not proceed by the standardisation of shares. The emphasis on 'demand' - sharing is often inaugurated by the other party putting forward a claim – carries unmistakable echoes with Islamic forms of generating prosperity that relate to *zakat*, the one-way wealth transfer affluent Muslims are required to perform annually as a test of faith. As is the case with sharing, *zakat* has commonly been understood as Islamic charity by many foreign and Muslim scholars. Yet, as Retsikas' (2016) demonstrates the glossing of *zakat* as charity forecloses alternative understandings of the practice as a right. Treating *zakat* as charity tends to obscure the role claimants play in its practice who act so as to draw out, elicit or 'solicit' such wealth. Both *zakat* and sharing practices should not be considered as aberrations: because they put our capacity for culture critique to the test, they should be accorded a central place in our re-valuation of the norms of equivalence and due return.

One source of ideas in the development of such project no doubt lies in reinvigorating old alliances between anthropology and philosophy with new energy and significance. For instance, Georges Bataille's (1988) notion of 'general economy' could be extremely valuable: its privileging of excess and expenditure as Life's givens is a most accomplished, yet under-appreciated, counter-work to the metaphysical principles that permeate the 'restricted economy' of political economists. Bataille's starting point is the idea of an economy, not as an exclusive

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<sup>10</sup> It is important in this context to keep in mind that the notions of equivalent and just returns are distinct: while the latter refers to the exploitation inherent in capitalist production, principally the process of surplus-value production, the appropriation of which workers are axiomatically excluded from, the former concerns the metaphysics of exchange, i.e. its conditions of possibility as a method of accomplishing value transfers. In this respect it would not be wrong to assert that Marx's interpretation of the value of wages as unfair is situated well-within a bourgeois understanding of property rights that valorises a labourer's ownership of the entirety of his/her labour's product.

human phenomenon or socially delimited institution, but as a cosmic process in which all forms of Life, material and immaterial, participate in, with such process centring on the superabundance of energy available, flowing through the universe, and its lavish, 'sacrificial' expenditure. As such, it is not human toil, with its practice of efficient production, ascetic accumulation, and prudent investment that sits at the heart of value's creation and multiplication. Instead Bataille treats Life itself as synonymous with excess in conceptual movement that takes the generation and destruction of surpluses as reciprocally presupposed and mutually necessary activities.<sup>11</sup> His notion of the 'general economy'

'requires the overturning of economic principles –the overturning of the ethics that ground them. Changing from the perspectives of restrictive economy to those of general economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking – and of ethics. If a part of wealth (subject of a rough estimate) is doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit, it is logical, even inescapable, to surrender commodities without return' (1988: 25).

The ultimate case of a transfer without return is the sun's emitting of energy throughout the solar system: this energy is produced by means of the sun consuming its own matter, further transforming it to light, making thus life on earth possible.

The solar principle of self-expenditure is the event Bataille finds replicated across biological and social life: from the surpluses produced by life's basic chemical reactions to the sacrifices of the ancient Aztecs and the *potlatch* of Alaska's Amerindians whereby value is actively destroyed on a mass scale as a prelude to the generation of even greater value. In this conceptual scheme, the norm is for an excess of wealth and its profitless outpouring, lavish consumption and intentional loss to correspond to the axiomatic position. Instead of beginning with scarcity of resources, thus making their use and/or exchange the pivot around which value revolves, Bataille's non-economistic account lays emphasis on energy, its unlimited outflows, constancy of transformations and manifold of manifestations. The value of his account is, to repeat, the re-description of Life as always, already given to prosperity and multiplicity. According to it, the capacity to expend the very wealth/energy one is constituted by is to be given primacy over the capacity to produce by means of honest labour. To the extent that Bataille manages to effectively re-insert (wo)man into the cosmos on the basis of him/her being another – rather than an exceptional – form of matter, something profound in our understanding has changed. The image of (wo)man the producer, itself the re-duplication of an older, biblical image of God as the Creator, has been done away with a new - transitive and chiasmic - image of (wo)man: following closely Nietzsche's instruction for 'philosophising with a hammer' (1998), Bataille effectively re-inscribes (wo)man as both value/energy transformed and transformer of value/energy.

## After Puritanism

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<sup>11</sup> Better known as a novelist rather than a philosopher, Bataille is nevertheless attracting increasing attention in the social sciences and humanities lately, see for example Armitage (2001) and Sørensen (2012). His philosophy of excess is in direct conversation with Nietzsche, see Bataille (2004).



A theme running through the papers in this Special Section is the need for nuanced assessment of the relationship between economic and moral forms of value. A great deal of work in anthropology in particular and the social sciences more generally has sought to emphasise how in the context of neoliberal forms of economic life, merchants and entrepreneurs have often sought both to make money and do good (Osella and Osella 2009; see also McCloskey 2010, Gudeman 2009), or, as Paul Anderson puts it in this volume, to use wealth generated in this context to ‘maximise their opportunities for salvation and reward’. Several of the articles collected here – including most especially those by Anderson and Retsikas - however seek to assess the relationship between economic and moral values in a more critical and nuanced manner. Echoing Weber’s classic study of early Puritans (1985), they suggest that an analysis of the context in which boundaries between these two fields are drawn should take priority, rather than assuming that such a boundary inevitably or indeed should exist. In his recent study of the moral worlds of Afghan commodity traders, for example, Magnus Marsden (2016) has pointed to the way in which for many of his informants, being a trader was itself a profoundly moral activity, requiring not only the ability to establish ties of trust and respect but also the skill to judge the moral value and worth of business partners and associates. For Marsden’s informants, trade was not simply thought of as a wealth generating activity that could be morally beneficial, but rather as a form of moral conduct in and of itself.

In this volume, Paul Anderson also brings comparable attention to the merchant as a helpful figure through which to think about the relationship between economic and moral value. Anderson explores the interplay of moral and economic value in the worlds of the merchants with whom he conducted research in Aleppo. The merchants were less interested in the ‘possibility of maximising reward’ than in the manner in which ‘rewards were distributed among moral networks’: this was the case because more than being concerned by ‘individual salvific reward’, they were gripped by the possibility of a ‘transcendent imaginary of society and economy as systems integrated by the circulation of divine reward and ordered by divine beneficence’ (see also Anderson 2011). Anderson’s informants were interested in *thawab* (moral merit) and *baraka* (blessing) ‘less from the perspective of maximising chances of salvation or prosperity, and more as a way of imagining meaningful social bonds’. This mode of analysis helps us move beyond the tendency of focusing on the relationship between economic and moral values as ultimately being about the desire on the part of capitalists to reset through acts of piety moral boundaries crossed during the course of the acquisition of wealth. Alternatively, it also destabilizes understandings of such behaviour as reflecting anxious attempts to maximise the opportunities for salvation and reward in the context of a pervasively neoliberal world. Far from being anxious indeed, Anderson brings attention to Aleppine merchants’ ‘enjoyment of the abundant meanings of the ways in which reward is circulated and blessing distributed.’

Another aspect of the papers gathered together in this collection concerns the theme of temporality. Indeed, our inspiration to think about the anthropology of prosperity through the lens of Smith and Sahlins, rather than the work of more modern theorists of neo-liberalism, captures why we think that work by anthropologists around the theme of prosperity needs to demonstrate a sensitivity both towards history *and* temporality. The realisation that the contributors to this Special Section have found Adam Smith’s thinking on wealth and prosperity relevant to their ethnographic findings calls upon anthropologists to consider the *longue durée* in their analysis of economic and social life. In addition, the contributors collectively bring recognition to the ways in which different modes of organising economic life – capitalism, mercantilism, neoliberalism, to name but a few – do not merely emerge and displace one another in an evolutionary or teleological manner, but, rather, exert and sustain long-lasting influences – what Jane Guyer (2004) refers to as traces – on different societies,

regions, and contexts. As Marsden has recently argued, treating neo-liberalism as the singularly most relevant frame for the analysis of economic life obfuscates ‘the interplay of local sociality, official discourse and state control’ (Steinmüller 2011: 264) and ‘makes it appear as if neo-liberalism predictably and one-dimensionally determines people’s thinking, everyday lives, and identities regardless of the context in which these are performed and enacted’ (Marsden 2016: 28). In this regard, then, our attention is not simply to challenge the relevance of anthropological work on neoliberalism to understanding the alternate modes of being prosperous excavated in this special section, but, rather to suggest that neoliberalism need not always be the single or most analytically valued lens through which to explore this aspect of our informants’ worlds.

Theoretical engagements with economic and moral value are also by necessity incomplete if they do not directly account for the intimate link between value creation and time, acknowledging and building upon the temporality involved in the process of producing, transferring, and consuming value. The link between time and prosperity generation has a long history in Western political economy thinking, going at least as far back as Adam Smith’s writings. Espousing what is conventionally labelled as labour theory of value, Smith argued that apart from the cases of spontaneous growth, land is productive if and only if worked on, granting human productive activity with the capacity to create value anew by means of constantly transforming the givens of nature (2007: 65). It goes without saying that for Smith such activity was situated in time in a double sense: first in terms of the time it takes to complete a task, and second in terms of the time it takes for its effects to come to fruition. The relation between value and labour was of course re-instated centuries later by Karl Marx (2010), albeit in modified form. As Retsikas reminds us in his contribution in this volume, Marx’s theory of surplus-value ‘expresses a temporal relation, [with value] accruing from the comparative valuation of goods in two distinct moments: the future instant of their sale vis-a-vis the past moment of the purchase of the labor necessary for making them.’ Additionally, Marx’s prophecy of a forthcoming communist utopia reinforced the temporal dimension of his analysis of capitalism’s ultimate demise, signaling the importance he attributed to future times for humanity achieving un-alienated happiness. The intimate connection between value and time that political economy thinking has bequeathed us whereby time is thought of as a commodity in short supply, and conceived in terms of human productive labor, forms a presupposition that we seek to problematize directly in this volume. In particular, Retsikas and Pickering articulate a two-pronged critique, the first by highlighting the intermediation of non-human actors in the multiplication of value in his description of an Indonesian Islamic televangelist’ popular musings, the second by paying attention to the plenitude involved in being lazy, and living life in the slow lane, as understood and practiced by a loose community of American ‘drop-outs’ in contemporary Hawaii.

## **Ethno-Hegiras**

Let us now turn to the individual articles and the contributions they make to anthropology. Luigi Achilli’s contribution to the volume carries forward many of the themes highlighted in the introduction, stressing the ambivalent and at times paradoxical entanglement of neoliberal processes of wealth accumulation and alternative understandings of affluence and well-being. Achilli’s paper on the challenges faced by Palestinian camp dwellers in Amman, Jordan is particularly instructive for it reminds us that the lives of people experiencing material

deprivation and political marginality as a matter of everyday existence are not reducible to their description - scholarly, journalistic or otherwise- as unfortunate and impoverished. In contrast to neoliberal planners, investors and humanitarian operators who implicitly associate the camp's conditions of material deprivation with processes of leading a life of perhaps lesser value, Achilli pays attention to the refugees' own evaluation of their life circumstances that accords it more positive dimensions. In particular, by turning poverty into an index of ethical and moral qualities such as those a higher level of commitment to the political cause of a liberated Palestine and a well-honed capacity of caring for others and acting in solidarity with them in joy as well as in grief, Palestinian refugees in Jordan actively refashion life in the camp into the necessary grounds for conducting a humble, yet more fulfilling, happier existence: political virtue, decency and honour are all rooted in successfully withstanding the trials and tribulations commonly posed by the camp. At the same time however, material wealth is duly recognised as crucial for the attainment of human dignity: 'a dignified life entails also owning a flat, purchasing a car, and being able to fulfil other desires such as buying a television set, a satellite dish, and fashionable clothes', writes Achilli. To the extent then that 'a true Palestinian needs also provide for his family', refugees look beyond the camp, venturing further afield in order to engage with processes of material wealth creation that would enable them to acquire the commodities necessary for fulfilling such obligations. In such circumstances, materially better-off Palestinians face an inescapable quandary, ethical as well as political, that only the undertaking of periodic visits to the camp, and the provisioning of remittances to relatives living there as indications of an enduring bond, can promise to capably navigate.

Paul Anderson's contribution concerning the charitable activities of Aleppo traders in Syria before the breaking out of civil war, moves our exploration of prosperity generation into the direction of the transcendental. True to Durkheimian sociology that ascribes to society the ultimate source of value, operating as is under the guise of a sacred sign that is as much duly misrecognised as unmistakably omnipresent, Anderson approaches Muslim traders' sociality as contingent on 'a transcendent imagery of society and economy as systems integrated by the circulation of divine reward and ordered by divine beneficence'. Such imagery comes into play with special effectiveness in the small and big acts of kindness and generosity that Muslims traders in Aleppo undertake as a matter of devotion to Allah. This is especially so during the fasting month of Ramadan, a period often marked by the payment of *zakat*, the obligatory wealth transfer that all well-off Muslims are required to perform annually.

While many commentators have recently highlighted the ways in which Islamic charity seems to be motivated by an individualistic ethos that construes its importance in terms of the accumulation of salvific credits, Anderson shows with great ethnographic clarity that what motivates these traders to do good critically exceeds narrow conceptions of self-interested calculation. Instead 'they were interested in *thawab* [rewards] and *baraka* [blessing] less from the perspective of maximising changes of salvation or prosperity, and more as a way of imagining *meaningful* social bonds'. The quintessential technique for the validation of social bonds' value involves the practice of "on-going charity" (*al-sadaqa al-jariyya*): according to this concept, every time the recipient of makes use of the gift, the original donor's *thawab* account is credited with further afterlife rewards. In this scheme the positions of the donor and the recipient are inter-changeable with almost immediate effect: it is precisely because the original donor comes to be the beneficiary of the initial recipient's subsequent actions that the social is actively reproduced and infinitely repeated by means of the circulation of divine rewards. Such divine rewards themselves accrue from acts of alternate giving and receiving. In this case, prosperity becomes synonymous with the social itself: it is precisely because the social attains the status of a meta-value in terms of which all other values derive and arise from that it comes to posthumously outline a person life's worth.

Konstantinos Retsikas' contribution delves further into the complexities of Islamic modes of giving, this time as conceived and propagated in the works and teachings of Yusuf Mansur, Indonesia's latest instantiation of a popular Muslim televangelist. Yusuf Mansur burst onto public consciousness in the late 2000s while Indonesians were desperate for a way of ameliorating the devastating effects of the 1999 Asian monetary crisis with political uncertainty and economic precarity looming large in every-day life. His preaching of 'the miracle of *sedekah*' (alms, voluntary gifts) formed a powerful intervention in the adversity of circumstances, calling upon the faithful to be good to each other and to treat their alms-giving as an investment that accrues positive future returns. At the same time, he supplied a precise mathematical apparatus, itself based on the literal understanding of specific Quranic verses, for anticipating and calculating the monetary value of such benefits-to-come.

Retsikas reads Mansur's Islamic version of prosperity gospel from the perspective of the entanglements it posits between value and difference, writing that 'according to Yusuf Mansur, for abundance to take effect, it is paramount that difference is affirmed twice over: the embracing of the alterity of the divine and the difference of other humans is an essential criterion'. As is the case with Anderson's Aleppo traders, Yusuf Mansur conceives the social as founded on a vertical plane of triangulated asymmetrical transfers amongst the following actors: 'Allah who asks men to evince their faith by being generous, the *sedekah* donor who performs worship by means of giving up part of his/her wealth, and the *sedekah* recipient who accepts the gift, yet is under no obligation to reciprocate, even if it is normally expected of him/her to pray for the benefit of the donor'. At the same time, the paper brings attention to the inter-mediation of time as a supplementary dimension of the differences at play, crediting the transfer of *sedekah* with the status of an event capable of making time pass, and hastening the arrival of the future. The affirmation of temporal difference, Retsikas argues, is instrumental for *sedekah* to work its miracle of delivering prosperity. By explicitly situating all kinds of ordinary acts of goodness within the general promise Allah made to (wo)man of eternal salvation, Yusuf Masnur effectively locates the future within an overarching salvific horizon whereby the forthcoming Day of Judgment involves the beginning of a new era of unimaginable, unlimited happiness.

The temporality inherent in efforts geared at the multiplication of value and the re-generation of abundance is a theme also directly addressed in the two papers that follow. Katharina Schneider's paper on the experiences of female fish traders in Java's northeast coast emphasizes the future as an important element of the livelihood strategies the traders deploy as they seek to ensure better living conditions for their children, and grandchildren. As Schneider observes, many women traders 'stressed that prosperity is not something they seek for themselves. Instead, they work as hard as they do in the hope that their children may have a more secure livelihood, and may enjoy more tranquil lives than they themselves are leading'. This is yet another case where the supply-and-demand for fish as a daily economic pursuit works for the propagation of values other than market determined ones: the 'restricted economy' is explicitly subordinated to advancing the interests of a 'general economy' in the shape of generations-to-come.

In addition to trading fish with great competence and astuteness, and often in adverse, uncertain and precarious circumstances, these Javanese women are also involved in securing deferred benefits through ritual activity. Central in this undertaking is the making of annual offerings to the sea: 'the main offering, which consisted of two buffalo heads placed into a carefully decorated miniature Danish seiner and two large trays of fruits and snacks' is paraded around neighboring fishing villages, escorted by drum-beating girl scouts. It is then taken out to sea where it is violently disassembled and fiercely scattered around with parts and slices

being sternly fought over by participants in a staged act that Javanese refer to as *rebutan*. Schneider demonstrates how the generation of prosperity - human and animal, economic and ecological- is intimately linked in Java with brief yet intense moments of violence and antagonism: such flashes were, of course, once integral in many 'traditional' weddings and circumcisions.

The saying 'time is money' continues to be widely uttered. In addition to subjugating time to monetary standards and measurements, the sayings' significance is intimately tied to the revolution that capitalism brought about in our experience of time: from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, time came to be conceived as a finite, limited resource, with its overall significance heightened due to a combination of factors. Amongst these factors perhaps the most important were the emergence of a new, secularist vision of human existence understood in reference to a fast approaching telos, and the novel importance attached to waged work as a means for securing sustenance, that is, for buying time and deferring death. Lucy Pickering's article on a community of 'drop-outs' in contemporary Hawai'i offers an astute ethnographic portrait of a social movement's dedicated effort at 'having' or 'taking' plenty of time to spare as a form of achieving counter-cultural affluence. Key in this critical endeavor is the inspiration derived from Baba Ram Das' seminal hippie text *Remember, Be Here Now*, a book that 'articulates a vision of the good life loosely based on Buddha's four noble truths, aimed at understanding and thus reducing suffering: for Ram Das these were often framed in terms of a focus on the present moment, of being here now'. Converted to everyday life such a focus entails the adoption of a new set of habits: leaving the US mainland behind, disappearing from the purview of the state, living off-grid, establishing loose communities of like-minded people, making do with few possessions, having no stable abode, growing papayas, pineapples and marihuana, along with learning to let go of the past. These practices are seen as being crucial for bringing about the self's attunement to the present moment as much as effecting the present's expansion into infinity. As Pickering puts it, 'an expanded present offers the opportunity to take up an invitation to 'jam', or to detour to the drum circle on the beach, or to sing songs while weeding. An expanded present offers an opportunity to say yes to invitations because that invitation does not clash with inflexible prior commitments. To be in an expansive present is to be liberated from the anxieties of modernity'.

Ultimately, the purpose of this section is not only to emphasize the diversity of values men and women hold on to the world over in a relativistic way, but to constitute prosperity as an explicit object of study for anthropology itself. Rather than inevitably treating the achievement of prosperity as the often problematic and secondary outcome of processes such as production and consumption, that are themselves of greater value as object of anthropological study, we propose that the papers collected here invite further ethnographic work on the diverse forms that being prosperous takes in the world today. What such a stance affords is greater insight into the values that inform and enrich human behaviours and predicaments across space and time, at every moment of social interaction. We also consider such critical engagement with value generation and multiplication to be inherently linked to the potential contributions that anthropology can make to public debates and concerns over human welfare, happiness and well-being.

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