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Trade, Trading, and Inequality

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The Editors' Note: Trade, Trading, and Inequality

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From Brexit to the prospect of “Trade Wars,” what once seemed a stable international trading system has been increasingly questioned and put up for negotiation. The fortunes of companies and entire countries can rise and fall over the course of a few tweets. Anthropologists have a long tradition of studying trade, traders, and trading. Anthropological examination stretches from the heights of international capitalist trade agreements to the commerce and exchanges of small-scale entrepreneurs who make the economy work.

This issue of *Open Anthropology* features anthropologists who build on anthropology’s rich tradition studying trade and exchange. We include 15 articles with an extraordinary geographical range—from free-trade zones in the Americas to financial speculation in Spain to markets in Africa to food-trade from Australia and Papua New Guinea. These articles reveal a diverse and active anthropology-on-the-move, illuminating aspects of human interconnection relevant to a wide audience. And although abstract economic accounts of trade are based on idealized notions of equivalence and equality, anthropologists have revealed that trade is very often an activity in which inequalities are produced and exacerbated.

We begin with “[Trueque: An Ethnographic Account of Barter, Trade and Money in Andean Ecuador](#)” by [Emilia Ferraro](#). Ferraro’s article, published in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* in 2011, provides an overview of some of the key issues anthropologists have examined regarding both monetary and non-monetary exchanges. In particular, Ferraro demonstrates the importance of barter, which “stands in complex and varied relationships to money, with which it coexists” (170). Ferraro makes the case that barter is worthy of anthropological attention, and that the Andean region is an important area to complement a tradition of anthropological research on exchange in Melanesia and Africa. Ferraro begins with an ethnographic vignette introducing the idea of trueque or barter, which “involves the simultaneous use of money, goods, animals, and crops. . . . Trueque allows the

exchange of goods for goods or cash, or animals. Therefore, it seems to stand between barter and commodity, without fitting comfortably into either category” (172). Such negotiations often involve money, but money is not the sole numerical measure for the transaction. Moreover, the transactions are located within socioeconomic historical relationships between individual trading partners and social groups. The multiple ethnic differentiations that characterize the area of fieldwork are negotiated and reasserted through it. Local notions of morality and fairness are attached to perceptions of ethnic and social identities, and have a place in the local cosmology (and geography) of the world, thus confirming that economic actors are never separate from the culturally defined exchanges that they create, and from the intentions they attach to them. (179)

Ferraro has indeed contributed to further the anthropological thinking on exchange using evidence from the Andes. Two other articles in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, “The Elders’ Measures: Barter, Value and Kinship in the Argentinean Andes” (2015) by [Olivia Angé](#) and “Theorizing Reciprocity: Andean Cooperation and the Reproduction of Community in Highland Bolivia” (2017) by [Marygold Walsh-Dilley](#) offer ethnographic insight and development of ideas about barter and reciprocity.

The next article we are able to include in this issue of *Open Anthropology* is from the same journal and region, but tackles consumer electronics and Chinese-Bolivian joint ventures. [Juliane Müller’s](#) “[Andean-Pacific Commerce and Credit: Bolivian Traders, Asian Migrant Businesses, and International Manufacturers in the Regional Economy](#)” (2018) takes us into the world of international trade, but from the perspective of a Bolivian economy that has become intertwined with China. Müller does ethnographic and historical research in both Bolivian urban marketplaces and a Chilean port city, arguing that the entanglement of different actors within a spatially expanded trade economy has provided extraordinary opportunities for upward mobility for some Bolivian traders, while others have been left behind. Success can be attributed to having made use of deferred payment options and supplier’s credit offered by providers. The main currency of this credit, implicit in the trade, is trustworthiness: that is, a good reputation built over time in periodically renewed interactions and with increasing purchase volumes. (21)

Müller describes how the shift from European and North American goods to Chinese trading partners was not just based on low prices, but on a historic relationship with a Chilean free-trade zone. “Given that formal employment remains the exception rather than the rule in Bolivia, trade mobility remains an important economic resource, and even for petty traders it tends to offer better remuneration than when they stay put” (33). Müller’s article provides a great example of how anthropologists also stay mobile in order to trace out these interconnections.

Another project requiring mobile anthropological approaches is evident in “[The Alimentary Forms of the Global Life: The Pacific Island Trade in Lamb and Mutton Flaps](#)” in *American Anthropologist* (2007) by Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington (see their joint [CulturalAnthro](#) website for more of their work). Gewertz and Errington were tracking the controversial flow of lamb and mutton flaps (sheep bellies) from New Zealand (NZ) and Australia to Papua New Guinea (PNG), where they are still consumed to the satisfaction of many, and to Fiji, where they have been recently banned to the regret of many. Significantly, those in NZ and Australia who produce them often refuse to eat them; correspondingly, those in

PNG (and elsewhere in the Pacific Islands) who do eat them know that they are eating what powerful others (generally, white others) eschew—what such others tend to view as suitable for consumption by their pets. (496)

Gewertz and Errington note that the traders of these commodities “must be attentive, vigilant, and hands-on if they are to make a profit” (497). For their analysis, Gewertz and Errington employ the frame of “critical fetishism” to observe that people use these commodities to think about their lives and global inequalities. Gewertz and Errington offer a detailed look at the traders of l-m flaps, as well as a comparison with stores and supermarkets. The trade and consumption of l-m flaps intertwine with class and capitalism:

What it means to be a member of any of the local groups compelled by l-m flaps is always affected by the larger, historically rooted relations of capitalism and class. It shows, in addition, that members of these groups, all engaged in critical fetishisms of their own, may understand reasonably well what these relations of capitalism and class are that both link and differentiate them. Thus informed, some might eventually be propelled to change their preferences or their politics—or perhaps just their markets. (504)

Following on the theme of food marketing is an article by [Gracia Clark](#), “[Working the Field: Kumasi Central Market as Community, Employer, and Home](#).” The article appears in the *Anthropology of Work Review* (2008) and offers reflections on Clark’s long-term ethnographic studies in this regionally-dominant market of Ghana. Here, Clark is taking account of the market as a workplace, both for the traders and for her as an ethnographer: Markets thrive because they mediate significant kinds of differences that correlate to differential access to resources. They bridge these differences (in ecology, wealth, class, and ethnicity) not by erasing them but by taking advantage of them, often in ways that perpetuate or intensify them. Traders were showing up to look for people different from themselves in specific ways: customers, suppliers, and people from distant regions. Well, so was I. (70)

Clark’s article offers a wealth of insight for anyone interested in studying a marketplace, and for making sense of a world characterized by interconnection and change. Her work would herald a move away from the idea of bounded communities. “Within the Ghanaian marketplace system, the most prominent organizing principles were defined by key centers of activity, rather than a system of clear boundaries” (72). In the end, this also makes Clark question and adjust her own ethical commitments: “In general, I have also moved toward the principles of mutual benefit, not equal result, that traders use to judge each other’s commercial behavior. My ethical standards or goals have bent away from equality toward equity and survival” (74).

[Caroline Schuster’s](#) 2019 article on “[The Bottlenecks of Free Trade: Paraguay's Mau Cars and Contraband Markets in the Triple Frontier](#)” returns us to *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* and to South America. We use this article as an introduction for three selections that analyze the idiom of “Free Trade” when it becomes mobilized by traders rather than by government institutions or political elites. Here, the Triple Frontier is the intersecting area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay; mau refers to a legal gray area that Paraguayans particularly applied to contraband cars. “While mau is often cast as a regrettable holdover of

freewheeling frontier capitalism that has yet to be properly regulated within the national economy, this paper locates and theorizes the value transformations made possible by the ambiguity of both mau activity and official trade doctrines” (500).

In her crisscrossing of the Triple Frontier, Schuster develops the concept of “bottlenecks” as a way to understand the “intensification of unregulated economic activities alongside the proliferation of both state and private bureaucratic processes created to tame them” (501). Schuster includes a history of the Paraguayan frontier city, Ciudad del Este, and the multiple meanings of trafficking through the border area. Of particular importance for the bottlenecks is a national vehicle registry, which nevertheless never fully legalizes or regularizes the transport system. In fact, “the traffic cops who are meant to police the ‘free circulation’ of cars on the road were themselves using contraband vehicles that had not been properly registered” (507). Schuster’s accounts of driving through this area offer an opportunity for furthering our understanding of free market rhetoric:

Cars are a privileged site in Paraguay for theory-building in economic anthropology. From behind the wheel, we can recast free market discourses and create doubt about what is legalized in international trade regimes like Mercosur, while noting that mau is integrated into these very market dynamics. Simply put, mau is an idiom as well as a practical mechanism for regulating frontier capitalism, accumulation, and free trade. (514)

Proceeding directly with the themes of frontiers and trade is [Rebecca Galemba’s “‘Corn is food, not contraband’: The right to ‘free trade’ at the Mexico-Guatemala border”](#) published 2012 in *American Ethnologist*. Galemba’s work details life in border communities where traders insist that corn should be freely traded as food—and they also assert that there is a trade agreement between their countries—whereas the governments of both Mexico and Guatemala consider such trade to be contraband (716). As in previous articles, such trade is wrapped in ethical and moral issues. “Border residents debate ideas about ethical economic behavior and stress the legitimacy of this corn trade in a region where corn is vital to survival, there are few livelihood alternatives, and residents are excluded from official free trade provisions” (718). In such a situation, it seems almost self-evident that corn should be freely traded. Similarly to Schuster’s ethnographic work, Galemba makes cross-border trips with traders and the corn, while providing a historical perspective on the region.

Despite the border residents’ case for why free trade in corn is both ethical and justified, Galemba notes that “in other respects, their notions of who is ‘free’ to work and the dynamics of their trade generate new and exacerbate existing patterns of exclusion and inequality” (729). As Galemba concludes, these exclusions and inequalities, along with the “free trade” justifications also may then rebound to justify governmental trade policies. “When border residents appropriate the concept of free trade from neoliberal political-economic discourse, they call attention to the politics and ethics undergirding seemingly neutral economic ideologies—even as they may reproduce some of their effects” (730).

Such contradictions are also the subject of “[Traders versus the State: Negotiating Urban Renewal in Lào Cai City, Vietnam](#)” by [Kirsten Endres](#). Published in *City & Society* in 2019, Endres’s

work brings us to the central market of a Vietnamese border city. There, traders were in opposition to the government's construction ostensibly aimed at "modernizing" urban markets (4). Although for urban planners this is seen as an upgrade to the city, for the market vendors this construction jeopardizes their livelihood. In the case of Lào Cai City, the provincial government "forced (most of) the traders to take out substantial bank loans to raise capital for constructing the new market. In other words, the state shifted the responsibility for realizing its ambitious urban development plans to the people, at their own risk" (8).

Endres describes how the Vietnamese vendors attempted to negotiate, but eventually "closed their stalls in protest and launched a two-week strike" (13). However, provincial government officials also mobilized a campaign to win popular support. In some ways, Endres argues (like Galemba's article discussed above), that the traders' oppositional stance ends up reinforcing state goals:

This repurposing of socialist rhetoric to push neoliberal aims indicates that socialism and neoliberalism may actually have more in common than one might think. They share the idea that entrepreneurial individuals, by pursuing their own interests, will stimulate economic growth and political stability. . . . Paradoxically, then, their disagreement ultimately also reinforced a sense of shared interest and commitment to hegemonic visions of urban development in Vietnam's northern borderlands. (19)

Linked to a concern for socialist rhetoric and its after-effects is "[Moonshine, money, and the politics of liquidity in rural Russia](#)" by [Douglas Rogers](#). Also published in *American Ethnologist* (2005), Rogers did fieldwork in rural Russia where "moonshine competes with rubles for the status of primary currency" (63). Like the Ferraro article on barter that began this issue, Rogers disputes the idea that there is a dichotomy between gift and commodity. "I suggest that, by adopting a broader focus on liquidity, the object exchanges associated with barter and other informal connections appear as only one of several interrelated and contested strands of shifting exchangeability" (65). Rogers proceeds to document moonshine and money within households as gendered items (66-68), then to the realm of extended family and close friends (68-71), and also in the networks of the unemployed (71-74). These sections cover several "axes of stratification" that emerged after socialism (63), and lead to a consideration of ruble-dollar-ruble exchanges and financial speculation (74). Here, Rogers brings together the rural residents with the August 1998 crisis and bailout of Long-Term Capital Management (LTCM):

Hashing out the terms of LTCM's bailout in the conference room of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the CEOs of the world's biggest investment banks were wondering about the differential and relative exchangeabilities of transactables. Townspeople in Selych wrestled with their own versions of these dilemmas after the end of the Soviet Union. If using the lens of liquidity to bring these quandaries into the same analytic orbit and begin to trace their connections offers insight, it does so across a widening gulf of inequality. (76; for more on how Rogers's research developed, see [Petrobarter: Oil, Inequality, and the Political Imagination in and after the Cold War](#) in *Current Anthropology*.)

A 2017 article by [Jorge Núñez](#) in *Cultural Anthropology*, “[A Clinical Economy of Speculation: Financial Trading and Gambling Disorder in Spain](#),” continues the theme of currency and financial speculation during crisis. Núñez documents how some Spanish financial traders became characterized and medicalized as problem gamblers. “The mobilization of clinical resources was not simply a matter of regulating financial markets. In the process, new lines were being drawn around the concept of proper speculation” (269). This “pathologization of trading coincided with the so-called Great Recession, a never-ending crisis in banking that turned a foreclosure crisis into a sovereign debt crisis through an aggressive taxpayer-backed bailout policy” (270).

Núñez concentrates on the life history of Silvia, a female trader who illustrates how “the clinical economy of speculation is not a gender-neutral development. It soon became evident to me that female traders were subjected to greater control than men” (271). Núñez also brings a historical perspective that links a “diagnosis of gambling disorder” to “deep-rooted antigambling ideologies that have long shaped Spanish financial institutions” (273). Silvia’s work biography began with a job at a local bank; she then moved to the bank’s headquarters and became part of the investment division (277-78). However, after the housing bubble burst in 2007, Silvia went back to her hometown and set up as a freelance trader (278). In this freelance trading, Silvia would compromise her assets and those of her family, eventually being diagnosed as a gambler rather than a trader (283). Núñez believes we should see Silvia’s story in its historical and political context:

This is particularly important in a country like Spain, where the Great Recession has bred more new millionaires than ever before, with bankers and politicians dodging corruption scandals by claiming to have made their riches in trading and investing. At the same time, individuals like Silvia, who represent the smaller fish of the economy, are being medicalized and sometimes even incarcerated. (287)

The next two articles take us to the United States and analyze the institutional and regulatory aspects of trade. “[Trading on risk: The moral logics and economic reasoning of North Carolina farmers in water quality trading markets](#)” appears in the 2017 *Economic Anthropology* journal by co-authors [Caela O’Connell](#), [Marzieh Motallebi](#), [Deanna Osmond](#), and [Dana L. K. Hoag](#). The authors examine water quality trading (WQT) which “has emerged as a popular approach for cities and states to tackle water quality problems . . . WQT polices are market-based solutions, designed to allow markets to determine value and self-regulate in an efficient manner to solve environmental conservation problems” (225). They are specifically examining the choices and perspectives of North Carolina farmers in response to a new WQT program, noting that there is a dearth of research on how potential participants in such trade initiatives make decisions (226). Based on ethnographic interviews with farmers, the authors’ data “describe an aging population in Jordan Lake Watershed with a deep sense of history and knowledge of their communities, awareness of environmental problems, and a solid track record for conservation practice adoption” (231).

However, “the majority of farmers (74%) stated that they were unwilling or unlikely to participate in the Jordan Lake WQT program. They reached these conclusions despite reporting very high rates of conservation practice use on their farms and general knowledge of water

quality problems in Jordan Lake” (233). The farmers had a “pervasive skepticism” (233) about the program, identifying it as complex, risky, and potentially costly (234). The authors conclude: “These findings suggest that for WQT programs as well as other market-based initiatives to have any chance at success, they would need to significantly integrate stakeholders into policy design, address concerns of accountability for pollution, and eliminate some substantial risks for sellers” (236).

[Alexander S. Dent’s](#) article in *Linguistic Anthropology*, “[Intellectual Property in Practice: Filtering Testimony at the United States Trade Representative](#)” (2013), brings us directly into the institutional aspects of trade, and may provide additional reasons why people view such institutions with “pervasive skepticism.” Dent is examining how the United States Trade Representative (USTR) creates a special report and a public hearing which not only favors corporate interests (E49), but legitimates those interests in terms of intellectual property (IP) policies. “In sum, American governmental IP policy is an ongoing process whereby suitable and unsuitable positions are produced at linguistically mediated sites such as the Special 301 public hearings and the Special 301 Report” (E50).

Harnessing the analytical tools of linguistic anthropology, Dent develops the idea of “filtration” which “not only pushes some material to the side; it also brings selected material forward and highlights it” in order for the USTR to “establish its mandate” (E51). This mandate filtration then establishes subject positions for foreign governments, lobbyists, and NGOs (E52), with each group being treated differently. Dent discusses how the report features “sporadic specificity” (E57) which provides detail only in certain cases: “it is only in cases of strong economic competitors who also have a history of ideological and political opposition to capitalism that the report provides detailed information” (E57). Dent’s article offers a framework to consider the efficacy of institutional responses to trade, and even suggestions for how to challenge this language:

By examining the intertextual politics of policy-making, we can understand more about how certain subjectivities coalesce around particular “issues.” In other words, we can understand how mandates of various sorts create situationally relevant position-takings that are sometimes able to accomplish what they set out to do, but are, at other times, doomed to failure. (E62)

Continuing with the theme of institutions in relationship to trade, we turn to an institutional location in which trade is not supposed to take place: the refugee camp. [Rahul Oka’s](#) article “[Coping with the Refugee Wait: The Role of Consumption, Normalcy, and Dignity in Refugee Lives at Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya](#)” engages with how relief workers viewed commercial consumption by refugees not only as detrimental to relief logistics but as exacerbating the vulnerability of the refugees. Within the discourse of most aid organizations, the commercial-sector focus on providing relative comforts and luxuries within refugee camp settings has been considered costly, trivial, unreasonable, and nonessential. (25)

Published in *American Anthropologist* in 2014, Oka makes a persuasive argument that refugee consumption “allows the refugees to engage with others, to socialize, to celebrate, to mourn, and to gain some sense of normalcy in their daily lives. The ability to celebrate and communally consume goods brings normalcy; celebrating and communally consuming such items renders

dignity” (34). This is particularly important during what Oka calls the “refugee wait,” since refugees are in an almost perpetual state of transition and waiting for something to happen that will allow them to resume normal life.

Oka is able to make this argument because of a long background studying trade in ethnographic and archaeological contexts. He provides a detailed sense of the Kakuma Refugee camp and a nuanced analysis of indebtedness and inequality within the camps. Moreover, the implications are for more than refugee camps. “If confirmed, my observation that commercial consumption, despite its costs to both the relief effort and the refugees, has tangible benefits for refugees by providing normalcy, dignity, and some stability in an otherwise interminable state of static transience would also have significant implications for addressing issues of vulnerability beyond refugee communities” (35). For those interested in further analysis of such issues, consider the [Society for Economic Anthropology 2020 Annual Meeting on Convenience](#) where Rahul Oka is a co-chair.

Also based on research in Kenya is “[Mobilities and Risks in Coastal Kenya: Jumping Scales Versus Staying Local](#)” by [Dillon Mahoney](#). Appearing in *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, this 2016 article (like the article by Endres discussed above) begins with a scene of roadside traders “removed from the roadsides by waves of ‘city cleaning’ in the early 2000s” (176). Mahoney examines how these traders then turn to cell phones and the Internet in order to preserve or expand their business. The stories Mahoney collects explore “the disconnect between the economic mobility promised by corporate marketing of new digital technologies and the experiences of physical mobility (or immobility) that define the lived experiences of so many in urban Kenya” (177). Traders often find themselves in conditions of precarity and risk, leading to decisions about whether to attempt “jumping scales” or staying local (179). Mahoney compares the stories of two traders who wind up on different sides of a digital divide. One trader is able to invest in international markets; the other remains local but does find some success: Whether one chooses to expand into international networks or invest in local ones, there are unique and often unforeseeable risks involved. Placing these risks and their political and legal contexts at the center of mobilities studies helps push beyond ideological constructs such as the “digital-mobile” and instead focus on the lived experiences of inequality and exploitation that new mobilities are making possible. (187)

[Susanna Fioratta’s](#) article on “[A world of cheapness: Affordability, shoddiness, and second-best options in Guinea and China](#)” continues the theme of international connections, while also returning to Chinese-manufactured goods in the Müller article discussed above. Written for the journal of *Economic Anthropology* in 2019, Fioratta’s field situation differs from Müller’s, in that these Chinese-manufactured goods are perceived by consumers as cheap and shoddy. Fioratta suggests that the experiences of Guinean consumers who buy cheap Chinese goods that work sometimes (but sometimes not) parallel the experiences of Guinean traders who travel to China to buy merchandise when they would rather be going to Europe or America, places they imagine as truly wealthy. In a world of cheapness, people can access consumer goods and they can cross international borders, but not in the ways they would prefer. (87)

Fioratta's fieldwork occurs in Guinea and Senegal, as well as a brief trip to China where she was able to meet African businesspeople (89). For many people in Guinea, Chinese products present new opportunities (91). However, consumers and traders see Chinese-manufactured products as a less preferable alternative to being able to get products or trade in Europe and the United States (93). "Access to affordable yet shoddy Chinese-made products amounts to a kind of inclusion, but just barely. Guinean consumers and traders who buy and sell cheap Chinese goods are participating in global capitalism under conditions that are sometimes good enough but all too often cruddy" (95).

We conclude this issue of *Open Anthropology* with a fascinating photo essay in *Visual Anthropology Review* (2012). For "[Indian Religions in the Global Emerald Trade](#)," [Brian Brazeal](#) uses photography to explore an Indian emerald trade that has traditionally been dominated by the Jain religious tradition. The photographs focus on the men who ply the emerald trade in India, rather than on the European and North American women who will eventually wear the stones that they sell. They focus on the people rather than the stones. They try to locate these people in their social, economic, and especially religious contexts. The emerald trade follows the contours of religious communities. It would be impossible to deal in stones without the trust and credit of one's co-religionists. But emeralds also cross the boundaries of communities that are often held to be antagonistic to one another. Emeralds bring people together into webs of economic interdependence, even when their religious ethics might divide them. (121)

Brazeal's photographs are a fitting conclusion to an issue focused on trade, trading, and inequality from an anthropological perspective:

Photography reminds us that the categories created by scholars are inseparable from their enactment in the lives of the people we study. . . . They are images of negotiation between principle and practice. Negotiations in the emerald business are fraught because the stones are supposed to materialize qualities that are ineffable. These pictures attempt to make tangible some equally ineffable ethical axioms. (132)

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Emilia Ferraro – *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*. Vol 16, Issue 1:168-184 (2011)

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Coping with the Refugee Wait: The Role of Consumption, Normalcy, and Dignity in Refugee Lives at Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

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