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Contested commodities:

Mapping the moral landscape of exchange

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Abstract

In this article we focus on moral debates about commoditisation - the expansion of market relations of monetary exchange to new areas of social life. Starting with a brief account of our ethnographic work in Iceland on the commoditisation of fishing rights, we go on to note the remarkably similar discursive reactions that seem to be provoked by the process of commoditisation in diverse social settings around the world. Expanding a theoretical approach introduced by other scholars (including Bohannan, Appadurai, Kopytoff, Bloch and Parry, and Zelizer), we propose that the spatial metaphors of spheres, boundaries, pathways and landscapes can provide a useful and effective framework for the anthropological study of exchange. By attending to the actual pathways of exchange, and the discursive environment that frames and underpins such movements of things in social life, anthropologists can begin to uncover the moral landscape of the economy. Such topographies are in constant formation as an amalgam and synthesis of social relations and individual moralities, which are influenced, negotiated and debated in the collective environment of social life. This approach requires the abandonment of the dualism of embedded and disembedded economic behaviour, and the related dualism between the gift economy and commodity economy, and a concomitant expansion of the economy as an anthropological object of study.

Introduction

Until recently, anthropologists have generally avoided the study of economic life in Western societies. Following Polanyi's (1944) influential conceptual distinction between "embedded" and "disembedded" economies, anthropologists generally concentrated on economic life in "traditional" non-Western societies.¹ In such contexts, the economy was perceived as being so deeply embedded in society and culture, that it was all but impossible to untangle economic behaviour from the equally intertwined spheres of religion, kinship and political organisation. In contrast, economic life in the West was almost exclusively studied by economists, who emphasised the separate and independent nature of the economy in relation to other areas of social life. As Carrier (1996) points out, such was the force of this image that the notion of the "market" became, for many, emblematic for societies in the West - an occidentalist construction of a disembedded world, pervaded by a rationality of means and ends assumed to be unfettered by social relations or individual and collective moralities.

Recent theoretical attempts by anthropologists and sociologists to come to terms with the prevalent moral dissension encountered in response to the expansion of the realm of market-based monetary exchange in diverse social settings have cast doubt on the efficacy of the Polyanian divide between Western and non-Western economies and related dualisms of embedded and disembedded economic behaviour (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Bloch and Parry 1989; and Zelizer 1988, 1992). Contrary to formalist critiques of this dichotomous split, however, the scholars advocating this new approach argue for an expanded definition of economic life, emphasising and revitalising the significance of both social relations and individual and collective moralities for understanding economic behaviour.

This article discusses anthropological research on the moral economy that pervades and underlies all aspects of production, exchange and consumption in human societies. We propose that the spatial metaphors of spheres, pathways, boundaries and landscapes can provide a useful and effective framework for the anthropological study of economic life. Local criticisms of commoditisation, we argue, exemplify a more general cross-cultural pattern of "folk conversations" (see Gudeman and Rivera 1990) wherein people react to the levelling out of the economic landscape. This process involves the eradication and homogenisation of extant social relations and significations that govern the movement of things in exchange and the expansion of a single, universally commensurable standard of value. Interestingly, such objections are commonly manifest as condemnations of profit-oriented motives, laden with metaphors of danger, greed and immorality (Appadurai 1986; Kahn 1996).

The approach adopted here challenges neo-classical claims to an all-embracing and exclusive account of economic life in the West and elsewhere. In an influential anthropological study of consumption and economic life, Douglas and Isherwood noted that: "[w]hen it comes to policy problems, the theoretical gears [of economics] mesh badly with social reality" (1979: 15-16). Our investigation of the morality of exchange leads us to the same conclusion. We argue that by ignoring the irregularities and convolutions of the moral economy, economists do not merely run the risk of being misled by erroneous theoretical and empirical conclusions from their studies

¹ The reluctance of anthropologists to undertake analyses of economic life in Western societies is discussed by several scholars, including Dilley (1992), Gudeman (1992) and Hart (1991).

Indeed, to the extent that public policy in many parts of the world is influenced by the theories and models of economists, such policies are liable to be ineffective or, at worst, add to existing problems. In contrast, studies of the moral economy should prove to be a fruitful area of growth in anthropological research, with valuable practical implications for policy makers around the world.

Commoditising the environment: The contested nature of ITQ management in Iceland

The expansion of market relations of monetary exchange to new areas of social life - or, in other words, the process of commoditisation - presents an intriguing example of dynamism and transformation in the moral economy. This process has been widely documented in the context of "traditional" societies - following Bohannan's (1959) exemplary study of the impact of "general purpose money" on Tiv spheres of exchange. For many years Western anthropologists studied the overall impact of capitalism and the "penetration" of the market in formerly non-market contexts in other parts of the world. Recently, a number of anthropologists have rediscovered the economic "Other" in the societies of the former socialist bloc, focusing on their transformation at the end of the Cold War with the decollectivisation of land, the liquidation of co-operatives, the introduction of the free market, new modes of exchange, and the redefinition of money and commodities (see, for example, Holy 1992; Hann 1993a, 1993b; Humphrey 1995). Such societies, where the moral context of economic life is in turmoil after the collapse of a rigid and oppressive social order, are as Verdery remarks (1995: 3) "veritable laboratories for all manner of subjects".

Decollectivisation is obviously not restricted to the "Second World" and the present decade; the excitement for privatisation seems to be a global phenomenon in the late twentieth century. A similar and equally fascinating, albeit less tumultuous, transformation has been taking place in Western economies with the rapid extension of market approaches to many environmental goods formerly taken to be commonly owned - both in response to ideological commitments and economic and ecological problems. Currently, for instance, market approaches are applied to pollution-generating industries with the allocation and marketing of emission permits (Tietenberg 1994). Another example of the extension of market oriented monetary exchange in Western economies is represented by systems of individual transferable quotas (ITQs), an extreme form of environmental paternalism (Pálsson 1996). Typically, the implementation of ITQ management requires traditional common use-rights in natural resources (a forest or a fishing stock, for example) to be transformed into privately owned, divisible commodities, an arrangement that is assumed by many economists to promote sustainable resource use and economic efficiency. Given the promise of such apparently beneficial results, it is perhaps not surprising that ITQ systems have captured the imagination of many modern scholars and policy makers. The editors of Rights-Based Fishing, a collection of economic texts advocating the implementation of ITQ management, nicely convey the optimism and momentum associated with market-based solutions to environmental problems, suggesting that "ITQs are a part of one of the great institutional changes of our times: the enclosure and privatisation of the common resources of the ocean" (Neher et al 1989: 3). Not only is the idea of ITQs increasingly exported to other parts of the world, as a part of larger efforts to "modernise" and "develop", an increasing number of resource regimes in the industrialised part of the world are now being "modelled" along these lines, including several ocean fisheries in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Faeroe Isles, and Iceland.

Throughout most of Icelandic history, the principle of common use-rights has been applied to the resources of the sea (Pálsson 1991), as in many other parts of the Western world, the ocean was generally regarded as a boundless common resource. In 1984, however, with the threat of over fishing and declining catches, a management system based on individual transferable quotas (ITQs) was introduced to the major species in the Icelandic fisheries. Fishing rights were parcelled up into commodities and distributed between boat-owners on the basis of their vessels' "fishing history" (*aflareynsla*) - defined as their average catch over the previous three years (for a more detailed discussion of the system and its social consequences, see Helgason 1995; Pálsson and Helgason 1995).

As it turns out, the Icelandic ITQ system and its wider social and economic implications has been the subject of heated debates "on the ground", where central ethical and political questions are commonly raised. Traditional Icelandic conceptions of common rights in fish are intimately intertwined with sentiments of national sovereignty, personal autonomy and equity (Helgason 1995; Pálsson and Helgason 1996). Moreover, they incorporate the notion that fish can only be transformed into commodities through the process of being caught (see Pálsson 1991: 44-6). In contrast, the idea that individuals or companies can own and sell rights to fish that have yet to be caught, or even spawned - the crux of ITQ management - horrifies fishermen. One Icelandic fisherman voiced these concerns in an interview: "I think that [uncaught fish] can never be counted as property. They can't do that. I don't believe that boat owners can appropriate animals that are not yet born as their property, like calves that have not yet been conceived". However, interestingly, fishermen's objections do not apply equally to all kinds of transactions with ITQs. In particular, it is the profit-oriented monetary exchange of ITQs that is condemned. Such transactions bring into focus the newly acquired commodity nature of fishing rights, prioritising their exchange value over their use value. In the words of one fishermen's representative. "[w]e have nothing against boat owners who trade equivalent amounts of quotas in different fish species... but we will not tolerate quota-profiteering, where boat owners make money from selling what they don't own". Thus, for example, a boat owner that needs cod ITQs and trades an equivalent amount of haddock ITQs in return for them, is not branded a quota-profiteer. Significantly, such "quota-bartering" seems to neutralise the commodity nature otherwise associated with ITQs. Both parties to the transaction exchange like for like and retain the same overall amount of fishing rights. Money does not enter directly into the equation, and the exchange is considered to be based on needs for production and not immediate profit motives. Thus, in the face of the formal status of ITQs as marketable commodities, supposedly commensurate with money and subsequently any other commodity, fishermen endeavour to enclose them within an isolated, morally ratified sphere of exchange. What is more, Icelandic fishermen and many of the general public attempt to resist and contest the actuality of profit-oriented exchange with fishing rights through a vigorous discourse that brands offending boat owners as immoral "quota-profiteers" (*kvótabraskarar*).

A related concern to fishermen, and the Icelandic public, is the eventuality of fishing rights becoming concentrated in the hands of a few large companies. Large firms have indeed been accumulating ITQs, and in public discourse they are habitually referred to as "quota-kings" (*kvótakóngar*) and "lords of the sea" (*sægreifar*). Moreover, a state of affairs has emerged whereby these large consolidated companies, instead of using the ITQs on their own vessels, venture to increase their profit margin by leasing them to small scale operators with little or no ITQs of their own. This has

led fishermen to augment existing feudal metaphors by referring to their situation in the ITQ system, and that of the small-scale boat owners, as akin to the position of "serfs" in a "tenancy system" (lénskerfi)

The new commodity nature of fishing rights as ITQs has engendered a shift of emphasis from the valuing and rewarding of expertise and techniques in the catching of fish, to the issues of business expertise and access to economic resources to purchase quotas. Voicing a typical reaction to this trend, one skipper complained: "[t]he system has strayed from its original purpose, now that it is possible to buy [uncaught] fish in the sea. There are almost as many speculators on dry land as there are fishermen" (Dagur, 25th August 1991). Significantly, Creed, Apostle and McCay (1994) note the emergence of a similar discourse among the fishermen working under ITQ management in the Canadian Scotia-Fundy groundfish fishery. There the terms "Fish-lords" and "armchair fishermen" are used to castigate those individuals who make money from ITQs, but do not fish themselves. In Newfoundland, again a similar moral outrage has prevented the development of a full-blown ITQ system. Here, an intensive discussion of the immorality of transferable fishing licenses is grounded in a context of severe unemployment and chronic poverty: "It's not right, a feller . . . can give someone his quota to catch, and he probably has another job on the side. That isn't right" (see McCay 1995). Similar objections to enclosure abound in the history of Western agriculture (see, for instance, Neeson 1993).

Significantly, Icelandic fishermen went on a national strike in January 1994, protesting against the ITQ system under the slogan "No More Profiteering!" (Braskið burt!) As it turned out, the strike resulted in a two-week stand-still in the fishing industry, a predicament of grave importance for a nation that derives almost 70% of its gross national income from exporting fish. Ultimately, the strike was terminated by temporary laws which forced fishermen back to work. Not content with this turn of events, fishermen went on strike again in May 1995 - this time for four weeks.

In an important sense, moral debates on ITQs reflect a "pragmatic" disgruntlement with the economic loss associated with the transformation of common use-rights into the private property of a select group of producers. However, underlying and augmenting these sentiments there seems to be a deeper concern with the eradication and subversion of social relations and significations that were previously embedded in such rights, and their replacement with new social relations and meanings - those of homogenised and commensurable exchange values and profit motives associated with the world of commodities and monetary exchange. These concerns seem to have a number of parallels in other parts of the world. Given the significance of the market in Western political economy and discourse, the study of such reactions to commoditisation represents an important aspect of a rapidly emerging economic anthropology at home and abroad (Dilley 1992); and may help to prevent the implementation of self-defeating and socially destructive economic policies.

Conversations on commodities: Metaphors of danger and greed

Resistance against commoditisation is a frequent theme in many ethnographies. Often such resistance is underlined by a distinction between gift and commodity exchange, moral peril attaches to attempts to make personal gifts and services into objects of impersonal transaction. Thus, for example, a Hindu priest is likely to be condemned for "selling" salvation and atonement (Parry 1989). Often, too, those who get rich as a result of a growing cash economy are accused of engaging in underhand, and sometimes sinister, dealings. Taussig (1980) observes such associations in two separate

ethnographic contexts in rural South America - a Colombian coffee plantation and a Bolivian tin mine - where the peasant work-force was experiencing its first taste of commoditised labour. Many of the workers who gained profits through this new form of wage-labour were stigmatised for having made some kind of contract with the Devil. According to Taussig such images of evil were invoked as a way of making sense of and resisting the radical changes that were transforming the social relations of production for these people in an emerging market economy. An analogous, albeit slightly differently phrased, reaction to the introduction of wage-labour has been identified in a number of societies in Cameroon (Geschiere 1992). These local discourses commonly invoke images of lifeless bodies, the victims of witchcraft, exploited to create profits in the new economic environment of commoditised labour. In some cases, particular kinds of money are singled out and classified as evil. Thus, the Luo in Kenya speak of money earned through lotteries or sales of certain valuables, especially land, as "bitter" or "dirty" money.²

There is a tendency among anthropologists to interpret such resistance to commoditisation as the response to colonialism.³ However, such discursive reactions to shifts in the use and conceptualisation of money are not restricted to colonial contexts. Verdery (1995) describes the response of Romanians to *Caritas*, a crooked post-communist pyramid investment scheme that earned the trust of many sceptical Romanians by paying out high dividends to its first investors and was thought to be instilling the population with new market-oriented attitudes. When attempting to comprehend the system many Romanians made a distinction between earned money and unearned money, reflecting a belief in the moral superiority of material production as the source of value. Moreover, this scheme that enabled people to make large profits of "unearned" money, was commonly described as unnatural, demonic and a form of theft and its participants were labelled as greedy and lazy (Verdery 1995).

Western market societies are by no means exempt from such moral discourses; here, too, some items and services exist in an uneasy relationship with the realm of the marketplace. Zelizer (1992) provides an interesting account of the cultural resistance in nineteenth-century America to the marketing of human life in the form of life insurance; such resistance to "betting" with one's life against insurance companies, she argues, "introduced structural sources of strain and ambivalence" (1992: 287). Benefits from life insurance were sometimes regarded as "dirty money". More recent developments in genetic engineering and medical technology have opened up greater possibilities for practices such as surrogate motherhood and the marketing of "body parts" - raising even stronger public objections and more pressing ethical debates. Munzer (1994) explores the "uneasy case" against recognising property rights in human organs, tissues, fluids, cells, and genetic material. For some, somatic commoditisation is inhuman and degrading, an offence against personhood and dignity,

² Here, the registration of formerly communal land as private property began in the 1950s as the British colonial government launched its plans to "individualise" land, the first nation-wide privatisation scheme on the African continent (Shipton 1989: 30).

³ Willis (1973), for instance, has analysed a particular myth of the Fipa of Tanzania as an indigenous critique of colonialism. According to the myth, a prophet proclaims "Something is coming, creeping from the east - something with god-like powers. O you people, you are going to be robbed of your country - You won't even be allowed to cough. . . Everything becomes currency - grass and the very earth itself" (Willis 1973: 253-254).

but for others it represents a humanitarian effort in that it increases the supply of body parts and, therefore, saves lives. Significantly, the notion of organic materials as commodities is more problematic in some cases than in others. Thus, for example, although their produce is far from being freely marketable, sperm-donors in England commonly receive a monetary payment from sperm banks in return for their contributions. Transactions with human ova, however, are viewed as "altruistic" and "supportive" and are subject to more stringent regulation (Price 1993). The sentiments underlying this conceptual difference became manifest recently in an almost ubiquitous public reaction of moral outrage when a distinguished private fertility clinic in England was accused of buying ova from women and selling them as part of a treatment enabling infertile women to become pregnant. More generally, Hirsch (1993) provides an intriguing ethnographic account of uneasiness exhibited by couples in south-east England about the "unbridled consumerism" or "baby-shopping" that they believe will supervene the new reproductive technologies.

In medieval Europe, scholars frequently associated bartering and exchange with destructive passions and notions of immorality (Hirschman 1982; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). Medieval merchants were continuously attacked for selling something which they could not possess on the grounds that their profit, particularly from lending money, implied "a mortgage on time, which was supposed to belong to God alone" (Le Goff, cited in Parry 1989: 82). Traces of the European discourse on freeloaders and profiteering are evident in the Icelandic sagas as well as other medieval manuscripts and similar motifs are shown in the frescoes of Härkeberga Church near Uppsala, Sweden (see Figure 1). The artist, it seems, made a fundamental moral distinction between necessity and exchange. The former is represented by apparently virtuous images (on the left in the figure) of food (manna) and the land, while the latter is portrayed as an indolent celebration of the golden calf (to the right) - a symbol of greed and debauchery.

Critiques of commoditisation do not only emanate from "the natives" in the field. Indeed, there is a rich legacy of opposition to market-based monetary exchange and its expansion in social life in the history of Western intellectual thought (Gudeman 1992b; Kahn 1996). Theoretical criticism of commoditisation and the market often draws upon the medieval European "house view" of profit, money, and the market (see Parry 1989; Gudeman 1992a, 1992b), a view formulated by Thomas Aquinas, and the Schoolmen, and later developed by Marx, Simmel, and several other social theorists.⁴

In German thought the notions of "community", oikos, and das ganze Haus have frequently supplied a radical economic "Other", the ground from which to project the failures of economism and its notion of Homo oeconomicus (Kahn 1990; see also Selznick 1992). Following a similar path, modern critics of the process of commoditisation often point out that market approaches obliterate egalitarian sensibilities and communitarian notions of stewardship and responsibility. The concepts of the perfect society and its antithesis, popular themes in the genealogy of Western scholarship generally, have taken many forms, all of which assume, as Berlin points out (1989: 120), a Golden Age when "men were innocent, happy, virtuous, peaceful, free, where everything was harmonious", followed by some kind of catastrophe - "the flood, man's first disobedience, original sin, the crime of Prometheus, the discovery of agriculture and metallurgy, primitive accumulation, and the like". It is not our intention

⁴ The European "house view", in turn, was grounded in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

in this article to add to such commentaries by passing judgement over the moral implications of commoditisation or market-based monetary exchange. Rather, we argue that it is important to go beyond rhetoric and ideology and to elucidate the context and social theory of commoditisation and its evaluation in social discourse.

Figure 1. The dual morality of necessity and exchange, consumption and profit
(From the ceiling of Härkeberga Church, Sweden, ca. 1480)



It is evident from our brief review of the literature that the process of commoditisation - the movement of "social things" towards a more central position in the realm of market transactions - seems to engender both "local" and scholarly discourses which incorporate remarkably similar themes. To paraphrase Gudeman and Rivera (1990), they constitute similar kinds of "folk conversations". This raises an intriguing anthropological problem. What is it about the process of commoditisation that evokes parallel reactions in such radically different social contexts? It is reasonable to start our search for an answer to this question in the theoretical body of neo-classical economics. Neo-classical economists are usually the leading advocates of commoditisation, and it is safe to say that theirs is a persuasive and particularly influential discourse on economic life

Neo-classical conceptions of economic life

The inhabitant of the neo-classical economy is Homo oeconomicus, an individual guided by self-interest and instrumental rationality, having, as Adam Smith put it, a natural "propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another" (1986: 117). Economists suppose that such individuals will react uniformly (albeit with more or less success) to changes in the supply and demand of resources and exchangeable things. In this conception, production, exchange and consumption are perceived as technical, and largely predictable, activities - effectively performed in a social vacuum. Neo-classical theorising presupposes and constitutes a flat and homogeneous economy, a relatively smooth "topography" uncomplicated by the unevenness and irregularity of social relations and individual or collective moralities.

While economists of course do not deny the existence of social relations and individual and collective moralities per se, they minimise the role of such factors in economic affairs by assigning them to the category of "externalities" - mere economic noise, which can generally be ignored by applying the principle of ceteris paribus (all other things being equal). In the neo-classical conception economic life is defined by the predicament of competition over limited resources. Thus, it is supposed that the "invisible hand" of the market mechanism compels individuals to ignore social relations and moral ideals which are not subject to legal enforcement. Indeed, all other things being equal, those that do not maintain a purely "rational" dispassionate and self-interested economic strategy will incur extra costs relative to those who do and are, therefore, doomed to go under in competition. Ultimately, then, the "invisible hand" (the net effect of aggregate individual economic choice), when left to its own devices, is assumed to take on a selective role, rewarding those who "disembled" themselves from social life and manage their economic affairs "rationally" and efficiently with higher levels of profit and penalising those who do not. The ultimate effect of this selection process on the economy is an increase in productive efficiency and a corresponding increase in gross economic rents.⁵

The principal irregularities that are perceived in the neo-classical economic landscape are held to result from restrictions to the freedom of choice in the economy, mainly in the extent of exchangeability. Such impediments are detrimental to Homo oeconomicus's proximate and ultimate goals of maximisation. Indeed, the actor is driven by a compulsion to extend, as far as possible, the valuation of all things

⁵ See Granovetter (1985) for an interesting discussion of the parallels between the "forces" of the market and natural selection

according to a single and universally commensurate monetary standard - thereby unearthing the "natural economy", where the true benevolent nature of Homo economicus can unfold. In this conception, money plays the role of the ultimate mediator and translator of values, promoting freedom of choice and actions, and providing incentive for further division of labour. The ever pragmatic Adam Smith nicely captures the perceived advantages of this transformation, arguing that it allows "the most dissimilar geniuses [to be] of use to one another; the different produces of their respective talents. . . . being brought, as it were, into a common stock, where every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of the other men's talents he has occasion for" (1986: 121).⁶ Accordingly, it follows that any removal of impediments to exchange improves the functioning of the economy and is thus advisable.

Unrestricted exchange under market conditions is held not only to increase overall economic rents, but also to accomplish an increase in the subjective evaluations of well-being (utility functions) of the economic actors involved. According to neo-classical theory, free-market exchange is necessarily a mutually beneficial act undertaken by two (or more) autonomous agents. Such exchange is by definition voluntary - else the market is not free - and given that both parties behave in a rational and self-interested manner, it will only take place when both parties expect to benefit in some way. The result is what economists refer to as a state of greater allocative or Pareto efficiency - or in simpler terms, aggregate subjective well-being. By the same token, neo-classical theory dictates that any involuntary redistribution of resources or new impediments to freedom of choice when it comes to exchange will result in a loss of allocative efficiency (Nelson 1993). Economic activity in the free-market, then, not only leads to a growth in the size of the "cake", it also leads individuals to be more content with their share of it. Accordingly, economists argue, the more exchange activity there is in the market, and the more things that are defined as mutually exchangeable, the better the outcome will be - a line of reasoning that is eagerly endorsed by the neo-classical economic actor, Homo oeconomicus.

Evidently, then, the theoretical and political fascination of neo-classical economists with the processes of privatisation and commoditisation derives directly from the assumptions and deductive reasoning that underlies their approach. However, it is just as clear that this approach renders economists blind to the kind of objections and resistance to the expansion of market-based monetary exchange that we described in the previous section. This blindness is not insignificant. As we have seen in the case of the commoditisation of fishing rights in Iceland, it can have serious implications for the realisation of policy recommendations that emanate from the practice of prescriptive economics.

Steps towards a social theory of the moral economy

It should be immediately apparent to most anthropologists that the neo-classical exposition of the economy, while not wholly unfounded, presents a greatly distorted picture of the actuality of economic practice, whether in "traditional" non-Western or "progressive" Western societies. Surprisingly, perhaps, this discrepancy is sometimes acknowledged, albeit downplayed, by neo-classical economists. In their conception,

⁶ For Adam Smith and many other ensuing scholars, the extended division of labour found in "western society" was generally considered to be its fundamental and quintessential economic character.

deviations from the "natural economy" are due to the effects of "externalities" - economic "noise" that impinges on the functioning of markets so as to make them imperfect. The exact nature of an externality, however, is only significant insofar as it can be eradicated. The new institutional economics, a young and somewhat contentious sub-discipline within the wider field of neo-classical economics, concerns itself with the analysis of externalities. Advocates of the new institutional economics attempt to discover how institutions - founded on "customs, taboos, [and] myths" (North 1993: 16) - contribute to the production of efficient or poor economic performance. Their perspective, then, is essentially normative and functionalist in the Radcliffe-Brownian sense, albeit with a much narrower focus on the ultimate ends of this functionality - that of efficient markets and economic growth.⁷ Aside from theoretical concerns, the foremost objective of this sub-discipline is to provide suggestions on how to restructure and rationalise the institutional framework of the economy so as to provide the correct environment and incentive for "true" market behaviour - typically, by securing property rights and expanding the degree of commoditisation (North 1993).

While commendable in many respects for its focus on social life and culture, the modified neo-classical approach of the new institutional economics is simply not sophisticated enough to deal with the complex and manifold social "institutions" that pervade and impinge on economic life. In contrast, such problems are part and parcel of anthropological and sociological analyses. Aside from the differential attentiveness that derives from disparate theoretical perspectives, it can be convincingly argued that "externalities" in economic life can best be uncovered, and their significance understood, in the field through direct contact and dialogue with real economic actors. The proximity of the ethnographic gaze is better-suited to the data at hand than the detached neo-classical view from afar.

So what kind of data can be extracted from the "socialised" economy? One fruitful approach has been proposed by Granovetter (1985), who explores the embeddedness of economic behaviour in companies and large corporations in the West. Granovetter (1985) argues that a great deal of interactions in this economic context diverge from the kind of behaviour expected from the under-socialised and atomised *Homo oeconomicus*. His fieldwork revealed extensive and stable networks of interpersonal relations that often tended to direct the flow of economic interactions from the path of greatest maximisation, generating trust and trustworthy behaviour where it ought not to be expected (Granovetter 1985).

That relationships between persons at the hub of the neo-classical economy are not detached and dispassionate and underpinned by the requisite of maximisation, suggests that deviations from the theoretical construct of the perfect market should more rightly be regarded as *intrinsic* to economic life than "external". Indeed, such an approach leads Granovetter to conclude that not only is there "a place for sociologists in the study of economic life but that their perspective is urgently required there" (1985: 506). What, then, of the question we raised at the beginning of this paper; how can we start to make sense of the market imperfections that are manifest in the

⁷ According to Nobel-prize winner North, "[i]nstitutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction", institutions, he goes on, "exist to reduce the ubiquitous uncertainty arising from that interaction" (1993: 15)

apparently analogous contentious reactions to the process of commoditisation in radically different social contexts?

Zelizer's (1989) engaging analysis of the world of commodities provides a useful point of departure. Penetrating into the heart of modern economic life, Zelizer explores the moral dimensions of Western conceptions of the supreme commodity: money. She argues that money in the modern world is not an "absolutely interchangeable" neutral intermediary of exchange, as economists commonly presume (Zelizer 1989: 345), and that money has a multiplicity of meanings that are shaped by cultural and social structural factors. Indeed, in "sociological accounting" individuals do not deem all money to be equivalent or interchangeable. Thus, for example, distinctions are made between wages, lottery winnings, donations, bonuses, bribes, ransoms, and proceeds from illegal activities not because they may differ quantitatively, but because they embody qualitatively distinct forms of social relations (cf. Shipton 1989; Verdery 1995). Moreover, the uses these different forms of money can be put to are largely governed by the way they are socially conceptualised (Zelizer 1989: 350-1). Money, then, is not fully homogenised, objectified and commensurable in modern market societies. On the contrary, one can identify various types of "special monies" which are implicated in the framework of social relations and marked by cultural conceptions that pervade all aspects of economic behaviour, constituting the moral economy. To encompass this "penetration" of social and moral values into the realm of commodities and market exchange Zelizer (1988) proposes a model of "multiple markets". Such markets constitute morally demarcated and segregated spheres of exchange that impede, to a greater or lesser extent, the commensurability of exchange values of different things.

A more detailed theoretical account of commoditisation and spheres of exchange in economic life is provided by Kopytoff (1986). According to Kopytoff, it is possible to discern a ubiquitous, polarised system of classification in every society, on the basis of which all things or classes of things are ordered. At one end of this continuum lies the ideal type of the perfect commodity - a thing with an exchange value that is fully commensurate with any and every other exchangeable item according to a single standard of value. At the other end lies the ideal type of absolute singularity, a conceptual category of uniqueness and incommensurability, which precludes the possibility of value comparison and exchange with other kinds of things. Between the extremities of these two ideal types, argues Kopytoff, lie the majority of social things, imbued with varying degrees of singularity and commodity status. These conceptualisations of things can in many cases be regarded as collective representations in the Durkheimian sense. However, it is important to note that the substance of such systems of classification are ultimately generated and upheld by individuals, and are therefore not necessarily (and perhaps rarely) consensual within groups.

An intriguing chapter in the biographical account of things relates to their movement in time along the commodity-singularity continuum - that is, their subjection to the transformational processes of commoditisation and singularisation. According to Kopytoff there is an inherent drive in every exchange system towards optimum commoditisation, to the extension of "the fundamentally seductive idea of exchange to as many items as the existing exchange technology will comfortably allow" (1986: 72). The significance of adding a temporal dimension to what is otherwise an apparently static conceptual classification of social things cannot be overstated. However, Kopytoff's invocation of technological determinism to explain the prevalence of

commoditisation in modern life is unfortunate (cf. Bloch and Parry 1989; Halperin 1995) It is essential to bear in mind that the process of commoditisation is ultimately initiated, accomplished, and potentially reversed, by groups and individuals grounded in a social and moral environment

Kopytoff's theoretical approach offers a comprehensive organisational model of the social world of things, highlighting equivalencies of exchange values as the primary features of economic life. Moreover, he draws attention to the practices of transformation and conversion that alter the structure of equivalencies in this scheme. However, while he does note that the movement of things along the singularity-commodity continuum often tends to be controversial, particularly conversions from singular status to commodity, Kopytoff does not address the nature of negative evaluations of, and resistance to, commoditisation.⁸ An explanation for the apparent cross-cultural similarities in reactions to such transformations must therefore be looked for elsewhere

A theoretical model proposed by Bloch and Parry (1989) provides one of the most cogent approaches to this problem. According to these scholars, the transactional world is ordinarily constituted by two related but separate orders. On the one hand, there are morally condoned transactions concerned with the reproduction of a long-term social or cosmic order characterised by the principle of generalised reciprocity - a typical example from the anthropological literature being gift exchange (see Carrier 1995). However, many other social forms can be subsumed under this type of transactional order, among which can be counted production for use in the household economy, representing a way of maintaining and reproducing the "house" (Bloch and Parry 1989; see also Taussig 1980, Gudeman 1986; Gudeman and Rivera 1990), the donation and reception of transplant-organs, taxation, and the use of common-pool resources, such as fisheries and grazing land. The other transactional order constitutes a sphere of morally undetermined short-term transactions concerned with the arena of individual competition, the most obvious example of which is, of course, the sphere of commodity exchange. In their discussion, Bloch and Parry emphasise the necessary coexistence of these two transactional orders as a way of resolving the fundamental predicament of an enduring social order that is sustained by transient individual human lives. The moral organisation of this schema is revealed when social things are moved between the long and short-term cycles. According to Bloch and Parry, transformations from the short-term individualistic order to the long-term order are commonly perceived as morally positive. Indeed, such conversions (for instance from commodity to gift) are held to be necessary for the perpetuation of the latter order (1989: 26). However, those who attempt to "divert resources of the long-term cycle for their own short-term transactions" are generally met with reactions of indignation and strong censure (Bloch and Parry 1989: 27). Worse still is the imminent corruption and social disintegration when the short-term cycle threatens to replace the long-term cycle.⁹

⁸ Kopytoff suggests that a primary function of culture is to act as a "cognitive discriminator" and because commoditisation entails the increased commensurability of exchange values (operating as a "cognitive homogeniser"), it follows that commoditisation serves to eradicate culture (Kopytoff 1986: 70). Opposition to this process, therefore, is literally a cultural reaction of territorialism

⁹ It is worth noting that this conception is not contradicted by individuals who attempt to maximise the exchangeability of things that are already considered to be imbued with commodity status. Hirsch (1994) describes an interesting case of the Fuyuge of Papua New Guinea, who long for "a road to the

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Bloch and Parry's model provides solid foundations for a social theory of the moral economy of things. Their abstraction of the manifold social relations that underpin incommensurable spheres of exchange in social life to a common and underlying theme of generalised reciprocity, concerned with enforcing the cohesion and sustenance of social life, is illuminating. However, while this abstraction provides crucial insights into the nature of exchange in social life and local objections to commoditisation, in some ways Bloch and Parry's framework is too general. For one thing, it does not explain why different types of objects within long-term transactional orders are often mutually incommensurable - as, for example, in the case of gifts and human organs. Thus, it is highly improbable that a gift to a donor would increase the likelihood of receiving an organ - in fact, such an attempt of "conversion" would probably be perceived as subversive and contaminating to the social relations underpinning both spheres of exchange¹⁰ In comparison, a similar action undertaken to initiate exchange relationships in "the business sector" is much less controversial and is indeed widely practised. This attests to the potentially strategic nature of gift exchange as a means of not only maintaining, but also of initiating and exploiting social relationships - a calculative dimension that places it closer than many would suppose to commodity exchange in social space (Appadurai 1986: 12).

Likewise, another qualification to Bloch and Parry's transactional model is that the world of commodities is not completely homogeneous or internally commensurable. Zelizer's (1989) analysis of the social meaning of money is a case in point, as are the examples outlined in previous sections of this paper. Another pertinent example of irregularities and restricted commensurabilities in the world of commodities relates to the price and pricelessness of objects of art and historical significance, an issue Kopytoff (1986) uses to illustrate his theoretical argument about the cultural biographies of things. In some contexts, a more fundamental, and perhaps illuminating, conceptual distinction between commodities might be one that follows Polanyi's (1944) division between true and "fictitious" commodities; the former being those things that are produced for exchange and use through the labour activities of people, while the latter are not produced, but are bought and sold as if they were - thus, things such as land, natural resources and labour itself are partitioned into commodities and ascribed an "artificial" exchange value¹¹ It is interesting to speculate whether non-produced things will tend to provoke more controversy when subjected to the process of commoditisation, and whether they tend, when in the state of "fictitious" commodities, to be less commensurable in exchange than "true" commodities. Certainly, many of the contentious reactions to commoditisation documented by anthropologists involve the emergence of "fictitious" commodities: wage labour, property rights in natural

market" in Port Moresby to procure increased monetary profits from selling betelnuts. Significantly, these profits are then ideally converted into a "long-term" ritual exchange system

¹⁰ Interestingly, however, presenting a gift to a donor might be significantly less problematic after having received a transplant organ

¹¹ While the labour theory of value that underlies the notion of the commodity fiction is no longer fashionable in academic circles, it may nevertheless be an important factor in the thoughts of actors in the moral economy.

resources, and a general-purpose money (arguably, money is the most fictitious of all commodities).

Unfortunately, an exact partitioning of the moral economy into distinct spheres of exchange is likely to be an abstruse and somewhat arbitrary undertaking - an indeterminacy that reflects the flux and mutability of social life. Boundaries will sometimes be context specific, and even when in effect, they will rarely be static or necessarily heeded by everyone. However, insofar as the exchange of things follows non-random patterns, and deviations from such paths are observed or censured in social discourse, it should be possible to identify discrete spheres of exchange.

The points raised above suggest an exceptionally inclusive demarcation of the economic life of things. Firstly, it discredits the simplistic dichotomous view that a thing is either a commodity, and consequently inside the economy, or not a commodity and, therefore, external to economic life. Instead, we behold an expanded economy that is partitioned into various spheres of exchange (or transactional orders), each delimited and permeated by a specific field of signification and social relations. This social and moral structure generates obstructions or pathways for the exchange of particular things with other things; to paraphrase Kopytoff (1986), it guides the social biographies of things.

To some, such an approach may appear to involve excessive lumping of distinct social activities - market exchange, barter, gift exchange, and more specific forms of exchange that are not encompassed by such general categories (including Kula-trade, dinner invitations, marriage exchange, academic or political favour, and transplant-organs) However, we argue that it is precisely by bringing together the manifold spheres of exchange associated with these and other exchange activities into a single framework, that the distinctions and relationships between them become clearer and more understandable. The resultant plurality of the economy does not entail the de-socialisation of spheres of exchange identified with gifts, transplant organs or any other objects of exchange. Neither does it require the de-rationalisation of more conventional economic spheres of exchange. Indeed, this approach does not dissolve distinctions, but makes them part of history and social context, and thus presents a means of making sense of economic behaviour and reactions to economic behaviour that are incomprehensible to neo-classical theorists.

Given this focus on the nature of coexistence between different spheres of exchange within societies, the dichotomous distinction between so-called non-Western "gift societies" and Western "commodity societies" loses much of its traditional potency (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Bloch and Parry 1989; Carrier 1995). Instead, the focus of attention moves to the alignment of, and intersections between, different spheres of exchange and the ways in which they are morally differentiated and kept separate from each other. Such a perspective offers a number of different approaches to the study of the economic life of things. One line of enquiry is exemplified by Keane (1994) in a study of interrelationships between distinct spheres of exchange among the Ankalang of Indonesia. Keane (1994) describes an intricate combination of reciprocal exchanges of persons, objects and words, that form an integral part of Ankalang marriage negotiations and ceremonies. Alternatively, the study of commoditisation - the focus of this paper - presents an example of transformation within the moral economy of things. Thus, as things and classes of things gravitate towards the commodity sphere of market exchange, boundaries are rearranged, equivalencies in exchange are homogenised and social relations and significations are transformed.

A notable and recurring theme in our discussion has been the use of the spatial metaphors of boundaries and spheres. Developing this spatial imagery further still, it becomes possible to conceive of the multiple spheres, boundaries and pathways in the economy as constituting a moral landscape that frames the economic life of things. While highly metaphorical, we feel that this approach may provide a useful means of comprehending economic behaviour and processes of change within diverse economies. For one thing, the distinction between the moral landscape of economic actors who "live" their economy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the detached, "objective" perspective of neo-classical economics parallels a series of other distinctions - namely, between place and space, inside and outside, foreground and background, actuality and potentiality (Hirsch 1995).¹² The outside perspective entertained by economists, purportedly a view from afar mediated by the "lens" of neo-classical theorising, suggests a virtually empty social space - a "natural" economy that is sought after but never quite achieved. In contrast, when viewed from the former perspective, from "the ground", the topography of economic life emerges as heterogeneous and laden with meaning shaped by social relations and collective and individual moralities. This moral landscape is both reconstructed and traversed by individuals in their everyday lives - and it is their actions that either provoke or thwart alterations. Indeed, the topography of the moral economy is in constant formation as an amalgam and synthesis of individual moralities, which are influenced, negotiated and debated in the collective environment of social life.

Typically, the regions of this landscape that are undergoing change will become highlighted and are placed in the foreground of social discourse as areas of ambiguity, instability and contention. The study of discursive contests and relations of power that are often associated with the process of commoditisation provides important inroads into highly "visible" and dynamic regions of the moral topography of economic life. Hence the importance of attending to social discourse and relations of power in economic life. While discourse is embedded in social relations, it is precisely through social discourse that people redefine their relations to one another and their place in the world; discourse and context are dialectically interlinked. In the case of commoditisation such a focus will inevitably bring to light both discourses of advocacy and resistance; with the latter providing the means to challenge changes that threaten to subvert existing conceptualisations and economic realities of production, exchange and consumption for the people concerned. As Dilley points out, "morality is a weapon in the attempt to address potential imbalances of power relations which arise from and are articulated through the extension and development of 'market relations'" (1992: 6). However, as Bloch and Parry (1989) suggest, it is more than just shifting power relations that drive the opposition to commoditisation. The levelling out of the economic landscape - the erosion of restricted commensurabilities of exchange - involves the eradication of extant social relations and significations that typically embody heterogeneous manifestations and approximations of a more abstract and socially cohesive principle of generalised reciprocity. These specific relations and significations are then supplanted with those of the market-place, where exchange is conducted through a single, universally commensurable standard of value (monetary or

¹² It is sometimes difficult, however, to maintain any radical distinction between inside and outside, for often the outside perspective informs the inside perspective and *vice versa*. Economic theorising and folk conversations are frequently intermingled.

otherwise) and governed by short-term profit motives and the more socially schismatic principle of balanced reciprocity. That such transformations tend to provoke analogous conversations of disenchantment and "sub-maximal" market behaviour in otherwise diverse contexts is, perhaps, not so surprising after all.

Concluding remarks

What, then, can we infer about the duality of economic life? Perhaps the most pronounced dualism one encounters in representations of economic life is that between embedded and disembedded economic behaviour. This dichotomous split mirrors and underpins a series of other dualisms, among which are those posited between the "gift economy" and the "commodity economy", "traditional" and "progressive" societies and the associated division of labour between the "new" social sciences and their alleged queen: economics. As we have argued, such a dualistic approach to economies is misleading, in that it essentialises and dichotomises (and thereby obscures) the diversity of actual motivations and rationales that underpin the relationships between persons and things in economic life. It is only by attending to the actual pathways of exchange, and the discursive environment that frames and underpins such movements of things in social life, that we can gain a true picture of economic behaviour. We have proposed an approach that integrates the complementary theoretical schemes of Bloch and Parry (1989) and Kopytoff (1986) into a single framework that expands existing spatial metaphors of spheres and boundaries to promote a more holistic understanding of commoditisation and exchange commensurabilities in the moral landscape of economic life.

To think of the economy as an uneven moral space or topography intersected by spheres of exchange is likely to invite the related notions of bounded communities, cultural dopes, and anthropological "translation". Anthropologists have tended to think of the subjects of their analyses as instruments of culture, imprisoned by the boundaries of their cultural worlds, while anthropologists themselves, in contrast, are presented as culture-free, as semiotic tour guides escorting alien "readers" in semiotic space (see Pálsson 1993, 1995). Given such a perspective, the role of the economic anthropologist is to identify the contours and confines of particular representations of the moral economy and to transfer the implicit meanings of economic life across bridges and boundaries. Much like general-purpose money is purported to "translate" the value of things belonging to the different spheres of economic life, transgressing the boundaries of the moral landscape, anthropologists are privileged, or so the saying goes, with the capacity to map out the ambiguities and understand what it means to entertain a particular representation of the moral landscape and to make it intelligible to those who happen to hold different positions. The perspective of spheres, boundaries, and translation, however, demands an important qualification. In contrast to the culturalist view of individuals as automatons following a collective superorganic script, we emphasise that the meaning and impetus behind the moral economy are ultimately derived from the creativity and intentionality of individuals. In each of the cases we have discussed the occurrence of conflict and change was emphasised, revealing the dynamism and flux caused by differential conceptions of the moral economy held by individuals and groups. Ingold remarks that the environment should not be likened to "a container or backcloth within or against which life goes on but rather to a piece of sculpture, or a monument, except in two respects: first, it is shaped not by one hand but by many; and second, the work is never complete. No environment is ever fully created, it is always undergoing creation. It is, as it were,

'work in progress'" (Ingold 1992: 50-51). Similarly, the landscape of the moral economy is the shifting construct of those who live with it

The reference to the role of anthropologists as "translators" of contrasting or conflicting economic landscapes highlights yet another form of duality that has emerged during the course of our discussion - one between local discourses, "on the ground", and intellectual discourses, emanating "from above". The commodity fiction of the modern world may be even more appealing than Polanyi envisaged - being both hyper-real and the subject of excessive fiction and rhetoric. This raises an old anthropological issue relating to the usefulness, for comparative purposes, of the emic categories of the "observer" - an issue touched upon by Marx (1976) when questioning the value of "bourgeois" analyses. Pursuing this politicised line of reasoning, Taussig suggests that in a market organized society the commodity fiction "becomes reality", adding that, as a result, "it is with these abstractions or symbols that we are forced to operate and comprehend the world" (1980: 9). Hart, in contrast, emphasises the potential importance of a comparative approach to economic life, arguing that while economics is "based on a claim to place human public and private affairs on a more rational footing" the task of economic anthropology is "to discover the limits of such a claim, by standing outside the western civilisation that produced it and asking how suited its intellectual forms are to the sort of world society that is emerging" (1990: 139)

In the context of commoditisation, it is clear that local and scholarly "conversations" are inextricably linked and mutually implicated in engendering and resolving conflicts and ambiguities in the moral landscapes of particular economies. The notion of a scholarly practice that can be disassociated from moral and political debates "on the ground" is indeed illusory. In fact, through their theorising and policy recommendations, neo-classical economists are perhaps more implicated in this messy world than any other modern scholars - in spite of attempts to mask this "defilement" through exaggerated self-images of objectivity (see Ferber and Nelson 1993, England 1993) As many commentators have argued, the idea of standing objectively outside or above the flow of social life is overly optimistic. On the contrary, it is precisely by immersing themselves in the social and moral context of economic life that anthropologists can examine what the rather loose reference to "markets" entails, exploring the moral topography of the economy; or in other words, how people talk about objects of exchange, and what they mean to those who live with them

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