

## **Anthropology of and for Non-Capitalism** **by Boone Shear and Brian Burke**

Like many idealistic graduate students, we chose anthropology for its emancipatory underpinnings. Comparative analysis and cultural relativism suggest a critical edge, and the study of astounding sociocultural diversity reveals that people are capable of organizing themselves in almost any way imaginable. On the one hand, anthropology unsettles the taken-for-granted, the everyday, and the hegemonic; on the other hand, it points us toward other ways of being in the world. Anthropology, thus, suffuses us with what Jason Antrosio describes as “moral optimism”; we *know* “that what currently exists does not have to be” (see his excellent blog, *Living Anthropologically*).

Filled with this moral optimism, we wanted to do more than document culture and power. We also wanted to fulfill anthropology’s promise, to embrace an epistemology and politics that could fundamentally address the economic and ecological crises. In short, we wanted to help change the world. But a funny thing happened along the way. As we began to explore the forces shaping the lives of our research subjects and ourselves, we began to feel an overriding, uncanny imperative to oppose, push back, and critique. As we critiqued the hegemonic, near totalizing power of global capitalism—tracing how its structuring logics infiltrated everyday practices and circumscribed local realities—new possibilities of being in the world, possibilities for fundamental change, were hidden, elided, or seemed impossible. Our desires for a new world were cleaved from our analysis, and our optimism faded from the political horizon, replaced by cynicism and despair.

In this essay, we discuss our experience of critical anthropology—what made it alluring and, at times, disabling—and we suggest one possible path toward an empowering, radical anthropology.

### **A Critique of Critique**

Critique is essential for radical theory and action. It uncovers the historical forces shaping both researcher and subject, connects the state of our world with particular configurations of exploitation and oppression, and therefore aligns closely with political efforts to oppose and resist power. In fact, we contend that critique invests us in what Jim Ferguson describes (in *The Uses of Neoliberalism*) as a politics of the “antis”—anti-racism, anti-neoliberalism, anti-poverty, and so on. The problem is that critical anthropology and critical politics are incomplete and sometimes counterproductive. They are well equipped to oppose and resist forces causing harm, but less adept at constructing and supporting viable, bold alternatives. For example, as Stephen Nugent writes in *Critical Anthropology: Foundational Works*, critical anthropology “is not good for institution building and creating power bases.”

The political and epistemological quagmire of critique is held in place and partially driven, we think, by the emotive and affective attachments it creates. Critique captures our energy, shapes our dispositions, and gives us pleasure through an analysis that exposes and opposes the world around us. Nowhere are these dynamics stronger than in

critical anthropology's stance toward capitalism. We have come to know capitalism as an economic and cultural system that marches through history, continually expanding, penetrating new places, and reproducing itself by bending people, cultural practices, and ideas to its needs. Capitalism is the essence of structure, a macro-context that frames all hypotheses and conclusions. Whether we are studying ecological disaster, state formation, social suffering, grassroots movements, or the vast inequalities between North and South, between white people and people of color, between men and women, between human and non-human—in the “last instance,” capitalism stands alone as the prime mover.

This approach does not erase economic difference, but it does obliterate the political promise of cultural and economic diversity. Economic anthropologists, cultural ecologists, and others demonstrate that people continue to engage in non-capitalism: gifting, bartering, and exchanging beyond markets; producing cooperatively and distributing profits collectively and democratically; interacting with one another and nature unguided by exchange value; and otherwise behaving in ways that are not based on individual, resource maximizing, self-interest. Nevertheless, our ethnographies and theories often represent different modes of production and non-capitalist “alternatives” as marginal, supplemental to, or always already folded into “the capitalist system.” Anthropology's subjects can oppose, resist and reform, but critical anthropology seems to show that even our activism is inevitably channeled into the structuring logics of class power and the unequal extraction of resources and value.

This is how theory constrains politics. When capitalism is understood to have the final say, possibilities for changing the world become feckless and naïve. Revolution becomes a vague, distant, utopian dream; an impossibility. Our moral optimism is reduced to envisioning “reasonable” political efforts that might ameliorate capitalism through reform and redistribution—progressive taxation, financial regulation, conservation and energy policy, and so on. In other words, we can envision interventions that are possible given the “realities” of our political landscape, but we dare not think beyond. We become adhered to what Alain Badiou posits in *The Idea of Communism* as “the state of the situation’, the system of constraints that limit the possibility of possibilities.” What are we left with? Our critical opposition provides a secure identity and the perverse pleasure of knowing how the world works, of knowing that material and discursive processes tied to capitalist production will produce subjects who ultimately reproduce capitalism. But our theoretical and ontological positioning offers no room for maneuver. Even if we want to move from reform, cynicism, and despair toward possibility, letting go of critique in the face of a historical juggernaut seems insouciant and irresponsible.

### **From Capitalocentrism to Diverse Economies**

The work of JK Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective provides a path forward: a different way of imagining the economy, an alternative understanding of class and power, and different affective, emotive, and political stances. Instead of imagining the economy as a system that contains, manipulates, and harnesses difference, they ask us to imagine the economy as a diverse array of economic processes. Capitalism is thus reduced to its core—the extraction of surplus by a privately owned firm for a

capitalist market—and other economic processes become both visible and meaningful, like the worker-owned cooperatives and mutualistic practices that Cornwell and Huff describe in this issue. From this ontological perspective, the economy is not defined by capitalism. Rather, capitalist processes are one possibility alongside many already existing non-capitalist ones, and each of us participates in and is shaped by multiple economic modes and multiple types of class processes every day.

In this imaginary, each relationship, subject, or site is not determined by capitalism, but, in an elaboration of Althusser that smacks of anthropological holism, is overdetermined: produced by the effects of all other processes all at once. Without any single, determining causal factor, every site is open to original analysis and transformation. This theoretical framework opens new epistemological spaces and different political desires. We are able to adopt stances of possibility and optimism, rather than only opposition and resistance. Most importantly, the diverse economies framework challenges our fundamental assumptions about what is and what must be, it extends our political horizons beyond reform and invites us to explore non-capitalist possibility.

What would it mean for our research and politics if instead of only paying attention to the power of capitalism and constraints on revolutionary transformation, we chose to work alongside our research subjects to help build shared knowledge around non-capitalism, help locate areas of convergence among different social actors for non-capitalist production, help tease out ideological lacunae, teach about, write and perform non-capitalist possibility? In Massachusetts, Shear works alongside social movements that are pursuing their own visions of the economy through a combination of resistance, reform, and the creation of non-capitalist relations. He is both a researcher of and for these social movements, participating in organizing activities, coalition building, workshops, public writing, advocacy and simultaneously helping to carve out theoretical space and develop language for non-capitalist politics. At the same time, he is analyzing how different, and sometimes contradictory, economic stances, discourses, and ideologies are understood, internalized, and deployed.

Burke studies economic activism in the barter and alternative currency systems of Medellín, Colombia. Working with barter activists to give public presentations, lead solidarity economy study groups, lobby for support, and organize markets, he examined a range of strategies to recreate economies, social relations, and subjectivities. Medellín's barter projects are unfinished and imperfect, but they offer important opportunities for cross-class and cross-generational interaction in a city that is violently divided, they provide material and social support for traders seeking to develop alternative subjectivities, and they help active traders gain control over the means of production and the conditions of their work. By examining the tensions and contradictions in barter activism, Burke hopes to deepen the counter-hegemonic potential of these projects.

### **Beyond Critique**

Critical theory is an important tool for describing and analyzing injustice and unsustainability. It helps us understand capitalist relations of production and commodity exchange as drivers of social alienation, massive inequalities, insecurity, and violence.

We don't want to abandon these insights. But intellectual traditions that suture together critique with a singular and determining "capitalist system" blind us to the long-recognized tenet that critique alone is insufficient, and they therefore hinder the creative construction of genuine alternatives. We think it is time to move beyond critique, to embrace the moral optimism of anthropology, and to join with our research subjects, who already desire non-capitalism and know that "another world is not only possible, it already exists."

*When **Boone Shear** is not hanging out with his 6-year-old daughter, he can be found working on his dissertation (supported by the University of Massachusetts–Amherst and the Wenner-Gren Foundation) examining economic subjectivity and social movements in Massachusetts.*

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