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Title

Money and Violence: Financial Self-Help Groups in a South African Township.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kt509dv>

Journal

ETHNOS, 74(1)

ISSN

0014-1844

Author

Maurer, Bill

Publication Date

2009

DOI

10.1080/00141840902751246

Peer reviewed

Book Reviews

Erik Bähre. 2007. *Money and Violence: Financial Self-Help Groups in a South African Township*. Leiden: Brill. x + 192 pp.

This insightful book describes the role of financial mutual aid societies among Xhosa migrants in Cape Town, South Africa. These societies, termed financial mutuals, are shown to form a key way that migrants navigate the city and mitigate the structural and personal violence they experience on a daily basis in their relationships with kin, community members, and strangers. When I picked up this book, I assumed that it would be about money – a subject I find of much interest. Instead, I came away with a powerful sense of the everyday violence, fear and uncertainty that grips many migrants to urban South Africa in the post-apartheid era. Money – the little of it that people can save or share – is a medium of relationality for new social ties that provide islands of security and solidarity. Yet at the same time, money brings more problems. This book is an anthropology of money and financial relationships. But this is also a book about political cultures, community politics and corruption.

The book lingers over questions of solidarity, trust, and migrants' hopes for the future, as well as meanings and practices associated with money. The book also documents the informal institutionalization of financial mutuals, and the plurality of forms of finance at migrants'

disposal. Challenging modernization theories that would predict that the use of informal savings mechanisms would decline as people gain increasing access to banks, Bähre shows that financial mutuals serve multiple functions in a repertoire of financial practices. Bähre is also careful to caution against the overly celebratory accounts of financial mutuals or similar informal organizations: they are also, we learn, hotbeds of conflict and sometimes violence themselves. Indeed, financial mutuals, Bähre argues, cannot be studied in isolation from the political conditions in which they arise, and themselves constitute a system of social control.

Bähre includes a number of financial arrangements under the umbrella term, financial mutual, such as burial societies, rotating savings and credit associations, and grocery clubs. He importantly directs attention to the ultimate disposal of funds collected in financial mutuals. As has been noted frequently in the literature, these funds most often end up spent on consumer goods rather than being invested in housing, land, or business enterprises. Bähre argues that consumption is vital to the maintenance of the social ties subtending financial mutuals and Xhosa relationships to their communities of origin. He also, importantly, emphasizes that paying more attention to consumption reveals 'a disharmonious world hidden behind the image of financial mutu-

als as warm, cozy, and sweet women's groups' (p. 22).

The book consists of an introduction, five substantive chapters, and a conclusion, and is a revision of Bähre's doctoral dissertation. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the role of apartheid, the state and capitalism in the formation of specific kinds of community and neighborhood relationships which emerged as central to the anti-apartheid struggle as well as migration in the post-apartheid era. Particularly significant here is the category *abakhaya*, an apartheid-era term that refers to people from one community of origin, who may be strangers upon their arrival in the city but who are able to activate this commonality in forming new groups. If apartheid created *abakhaya* relationships that got activated to ensure a connection between male migrants and their home community, the end of apartheid has meant a loosening of *abakhaya*, and the shifting gender demographics of migration to the city have placed greater emphasis on neighbors and kin in the formation of financial mutuals. As women create financial mutuals, moreover, they often do so in the idiom of kinship ('mothers' bringing new 'daughters' into the societies, for example). Chapter 3 is a compelling account of the political organization of the settlement in which Bähre conducted fieldwork, or, attempted to conduct fieldwork in conditions of extreme violence that impacted him very closely, his research assistant being attacked and his own safety and mobility compromised. What emerges from the account is a powerfully evocative illustration of how development assistance, channeled through local political bosses and organizations, becomes a means of consolidating and exercising power, sometimes ruthlessly. Bähre locates financial mutuals as havens or islands of solidarity – 'reluctant' solidarity (p.

85) – and relative security in this violent and unstable context. Chapter 4 provides an account of the establishment of mutuals. Again Bähre is careful to point out the exclusions and hierarchies based on reputation, gossip and distinctions between the 'stinking and mad poor' (p. 112) and everyone else – not 'sweet and cozy' to say the least. Chapter 5 discusses the maintenance of mutuals, a difficult prospect in a world governed by fear and distrust. Here, Bähre argues that fear, more than trust, contains the risks of financial mutuals. Chapter 6 focuses on consumption. I wish Bähre had spent more time addressing the argument that poor people globally make 'irrational' use of what little money they are able to save. The distinction between 'productive' and 'consumptive' uses is overworn and not really applicable when consumption becomes a central part of the contest over the making of enduring social ties and of social value not easily captured in the kinds of analytical frameworks that prioritize money as capital. The Conclusion focuses on the ambivalence of mutuals, and contains a thoughtful digression on Bähre's fieldwork experiences. It is an understatement that 'research among uprooted African migrants who lived in violent and insecure circumstances had its obvious methodological constraints' (p. 173). Bähre made the most of these constraints, turning his experience into a methodology for generating insights about the 'matter-of-factness' (p. 174) of everyday violence.

The book will work well in undergraduate classes because it is enlivened by illustrative vignettes about particular people Bähre came to know during his research. Their stories are not always entirely dispiriting, but definitely an antidote to the celebratory accounts of rotating credit associations which some of our students and interlocutors in the

development community hold dear. It would be useful in an economic anthropology class, or a class on development focusing on financial services for the poor. Paired with Mauss, it will help drive home the point that even the most apparently solidarity-building activities are shot through with ambivalence, and, indeed, agency.

Bill Maurer

University of California, Irvine, USA

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Heidi Carolyn Feldman. 2006. *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. xi + 306 pp.

Feldman's enjoyable and thought-provoking book is an extended reflection on processes of cultural creation and folklorization in the practices and discourses surrounding Afro-Peruvian music and dance. The theoretical terrain is perhaps familiar – the invention of tradition, the creation of a traditional, folkloric canon in a modernizing nation, the staging of rural authenticity and the exoticization of blackness for consumption (mainly through spectacle, but also through practice) by urbanites and non-blacks, the ironically circular cultural transactions in which the supposed bearers of authenticity learn their business from intellectual folklorizers, and so on – but Feldman handles her conceptual material with a deftness of touch, a theoretical sophistication and an ethnographic richness that make the book a great contribution to popular music studies and, more generally, to cultural and anthropological studies that dwell on entangled processes of the production and consumption of 'culture'.

The book's main chapters start with an account of how, in the 1950s, a white

folklorist, José Durand, created a music and dance company that reconstructed black Peruvian dance styles for a Lima audience. Interestingly – in comparison with many other Latin American countries where blackness was denied or at least marginalized in the process of nation-building – blackness came to be seen as a key element of an authentically *criollo* culture, defined by whites, but made real by a notional black heritage. This was in part a way of differentiating coastal Peruvian culture from the highland indigenous population (who were migrating in ever increasing numbers into Lima at the time). It was still the case in the 1980s, when Afro-Peruvian music was a staple of the middle-class commercial *peñas* (parties or club events built around audience participation in music and dance).

Subsequent chapters explore the work of Victoria and Nicomedes Santa Cruz, Afro-Peruvian siblings who, in collaboration with non-black intellectuals, founded performance groups, which created or re-created key Afro-Peruvian music and dance styles, such as the *landó* and the *zamacueca*. In this, they were inspired by local informants' memories, diasporic Afro-American elements (such as Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religious and dance practices) and 'ancestral memory' which tapped into an embodied African ancestry. These representations carved out a space for blackness in Peru that was more assertive and diasporic than *criollo* paternalism, although it was still strongly linked to expressions of nationalist sentiment. The same is true of the group Perú Negro, the dance troupe that, in the 1970s, internationalized Afro-Peruvian dance styles such as the *landó* and the *festejo*: Feldman argues that black culture, as part of Peru's folkloric heritage, was promoted by the revolutionary military government that took power in 1968 and that this objective was in constant tension

with a more 'subaltern' expression of Afro-Peruvian culture and identity, again linked to diasporic Africanness (often mediated through Cuba).

Chapter 5 looks at Chinchá, a region south of Lima, that became consecrated as the cradle of Afro-Peruvian culture and the source of inspiration for urban folklorists, even though local dance groups seemed to have learnt some of their routines from the Lima dance companies (e.g., via the television). Feldman argues that there is a post-modern sensibility in Chinchá that knowingly juxtaposes the modern and the traditional, the black and the mestizo, for a tourist audience; at the same time, there is a thoroughly modernist concern with real, rather than staged, authenticity that persistently reconstitutes Chinchá as *the* site of blackness in Peru and, as such, a tourist destination. She concludes that it is impossible to adjudicate between the narrative that casts Chinchá as the cradle of African culture in Peru and the one that portrays it as a site that emerged in relation to an urban need for tradition and authenticity: both narratives 'co-exist in relative harmony' (p. 213). Feldman devotes a final long chapter to Susana Baca and her rise to fame as a world music artist, via the mediation of David Byrne, who 'reenacted on a global scale, José Durand's role as White curator of Black Peruvian music' (p. 220). This apparently facile comment belies the nuances of Feldman's analysis of both Durand and Byrne: the 'black' music they were curating was itself a complex outcome of multiple mediations; the music came to mean 'blackness' in part through their curation. Feldman also examines cultural preservation efforts among Peruvians living in the United States, for whom Afro-Peruvian music creates a sense of nostalgia and migrant identity.

Partly because the history Feldman describes is relatively recent, allowing her to interview some of the main protagonists, partly because she learned many of the dances herself and, being able to read music, can also get into the technical musicological side of the material, she is able to give us a very detailed and in-depth account of the production and consumption of these black rhythms, dissecting not only the discourses about the music, but the choreography and the music itself. Her book is an excellent account of what might be called the hall of mirrors effect that occurs in a (post)-modernist cultural hierarchy: they look at us, looking at them, looking at us and so on, in endless chains of musical mediation. The 'real' is both always apparently present in the claims people make and also always at one remove, ungraspable. Feldman gives us real insight into these processes.

If there is one criticism I would make it is that Feldman does not venture into a more comparative mode: she eschews any consideration of how the institutionalization of blackness in Peruvian national culture measures up against other Latin American, and particularly Andean, countries. Also, and perhaps more surprisingly, she does not really place Afro-Peruvian cultural symbols in relation to Indo-Peruvian cultural symbols in the Peruvian national frame (other than to suggest that Andean migration to Lima fomented an Afro-tinged *criollismo*). In a country in which the Andean people – and their music – have played such a key role in national ideologies, it would have been good to see more on how blackness and indigeneity function together in Peruvian nationhood.

Peter Wade
University of Manchester, UK
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Alberto Corsín Jiménez (ed.). 2008. *Culture and Well-Being: Anthropological Approaches to Freedom and Political Ethics*. London: Pluto Press. vii + 207 pp.

This is a book that aims to start something, rather than to report on a conversation already in progress or to skim the cream off a mature trend. What it endeavors to initiate is an anthropological interest in studying well-being. That such an interest has scarcely existed until recently is, a number of contributors claim, not simply an oversight, but the product of deep disciplinary and more general social scientific biases in favor of studying the darker side of social life – the things that sometimes or mostly go wrong. Harper and Maddox, who neatly talk about the social scientific vantage as tending towards the ‘view from the clinic’ (p. 44), note that ‘part of the difficulty of articulating ways of being other than the pathological and the patient is that there has been a systematic bias in the social sciences, and in development discourse, to focus on the exceptional, on suffering and the “pathological”’ (p. 36). James points to the effects of this bias when she writes of well-being that ‘it is... much easier to point to situations in which it does not exist’ (p. 74), and other contributors as well mention how difficult it is to approach well-being with the anthropological tools they have at hand.

Of all of the contributors, Thin focuses most squarely on the lack of anthropological interest in well-being, devoting his bracing and original chapter to documenting and accounting for it. Defining subjective well-being as happiness (not the only definition on offer in the volume), he argues that we have precious few ethnographies of happiness. The Anthropological Index Online, he points out, has 239 entries for ‘suffering’, 392 for ‘illness’ (and another 3631 on ‘health’

that ‘are actually about illness and its treatments’), 1579 on ‘violence,’ but only 22 on ‘happiness’ (p. 137). We have clearly been industrious in documenting the unfortunate aspects of human life and slow to study its more positive features. Thin argues that there are four reasons for this: (1) a distrust of ‘hedonism’ or ‘utility’ as a primary motive for human action (p. 138); (2) a thoroughgoing ‘moral relativism’ and ‘adaptationism’ that presume that all cultures are good for those who live within them (p. 142); (3) a ‘pathologism’ that assumes that happiness is unmarked and thus uninteresting (p. 148); and (4) a tendency among psychological anthropologists, who might be expected to attend to happiness, to disregard emotion in favor of cognition, and to ignore on the basis of an ingrained constructivism the work on happiness being done by evolutionary psychologists (pp. 150–51). Some of Thin’s arguments are more compelling than others, but his chapter convincingly documents that in studying well-being the authors here are exploring anthropologically uncharted territory, and this provides a background against which the other chapters should be read.

It is certainly against this background that Corsín Jiménez, in his introduction, announces that ‘an anthropology of hope opens up very different political spaces to one that is based on anxiety, let alone violence or revolutionary struggle’ (p. 24). This can be taken as the point that all of the papers in volume make in one or another way. That they do not make it all in the same terms – defining well-being in the same way, or using it to open a window on the same kinds of theoretical, political, or ethnographic concerns – reflects how new the topic is, and cannot be counted as a problem in this case as it so often is when edited volumes on more established topics are tagged with

a lack of integration. Instead, the diversity of arguments and ethnographic materials on offer here indicates the energy a novel turn to studying well-being is capable of generating.

The chapters divide between those which are primarily theoretical and contain little or no ethnographic discussion, and those that are focused on ethnography (though not always without theoretical ambition). Corsín Jiménez's introduction and main chapter are firmly in the theoretical camp. In both, he shows how a focus on well-being can bring anthropology into dialogue with economists and moral and political philosophers, and he offers useful critical readings of such figures as Rawls and Sen (to whom a number of contributors refer). He also develops notions of proportionality and distribution that indicate directions in which the study of well-being can take anthropological theory. Lambek's searching chapter builds on a long engagement with topics related to well-being. Tying well-being to the ability to make ethical decisions, he draws on Macpherson to argue that virtue ethics rather than liberalism and allied social theories provides us with the best lens for studying how people create well-being in social life. James helpfully maps the semantic space occupied by 'welfare,' which she reads as a term that refers to the good of the social whole, and that of 'well-being,' which is an individual matter. Linking both ideas to related notions, and tracing the political uses to which they can be put, her contribution most indicates the value of insisting on some precision in our approach to these concepts.

Rapport's study of Scottish hospital porters is the most mixed paper in terms of my ethnography/theory categorization. He develops the theme, present also in Lambek and James, that steady partici-

pation in social life is a major component of well-being, while at the same time foregrounding a notion of balance that is important to Corsín Jiménez's interest in proportionality and to Lambek's Aristotelian view of ethics. Yet perhaps the most striking thing about his chapter is that it focuses on practices such as feigning illness to get off work that a decade ago would have been easy pickings for an analysis in terms of resistance. By looking at these activities in terms of the production of well-being instead, Rapport demonstrates how different an anthropology framed in this way would look from that recently important version of normal science.

Turning to the ethnographic chapters, Harper and Maddox look at how medical and literacy development programs in Nepal both draw on notions of pathology, keeping suffering rather than well-being most clearly in focus. Scheldeman also opens up the topic of pathologization by showing that the case of adolescent insulin-pump users forces one to confront the fact that well-being and health may not always increase in step with one another. Hirsch deploys a notion of scale to offer a thought-provoking discussion of the difference in the ways the imposition of colonial law and the initiation of resource extraction have impacted well-being amongst a Papua New Guinea group. Laidlaw's elegant contribution demonstrates what a fully-realized ethnography of ethics can contribute to the study of well being by looking at how the efforts of diaspora Jains to align themselves with the environmental and animal rights movements have led them to shift from a traditional virtue-ethical approach to a consequentialist one in understanding the contribution of non-violence to their well-being.

A book on a novel subject has to be judged by the number of ideas it sets

loose, rather than by the number of conclusions it draws. By this measure, this book is a great success, and one that points to the potential of a new area to anthropological study. I cannot think of anthropologists specializing in studying any topic who could not benefit from considering the issues this book does such a good job of raising.

Joel Robbins

University of California, San Diego, USA
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Caitlin Zaloom. 2006. *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London*. University of Chicago Press. v + 224 pp.

This very interesting book is about the circulation of global capital as seen from the trading floors and dealing rooms of financial markets.

In 1998 Caitlin Zaloom worked for six months as a clerk on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) and later spent 'the fall and winter of 2000' as a futures trader in an electronic dealing room in London. Based on her direct access to financial trading, Zaloom offers a fascinating perspective on global markets. She argues that these markets are sites where people, technology, organization and design are joined together in ways that make a particular kind of rationality possible – a rationality characterized by the strategic pursuit of self-interest – in other words: sites where the so-called economic man comes into existence.

Zaloom convincingly shows how this particular kind of economic man, and related versions thereof, is constantly in the process of being made, remade and maintained in financial market settings. In order for this economic man to come into being, a particular socio-technical setting is required, one that does not

come naturally. It is this setting the author sets out to describe.

Zaloom collected her material during a period when a fundamental transition in the organization and execution of financial trading was underway. It was a time when the traditional open outcry trading in large trading pits was slowly but steadily being replaced by electronic trading in smaller dealing rooms. Zaloom exemplifies this change by comparing and relating the Chicago trading pit to a London dealing room.

Zaloom argues that it is the process of managers and traders solving everyday market action problems that shapes the elementary forms of financial life: *space, technology, social composition, selves and representation* (p. 166).

Space has to do with the sounds and sights in the trading pit and in the digital dealing rooms. She describes how the physical layout of the trading pit in Chicago is organized around generating autonomous, rational, calculative actors. This design, which aims to create transparency and anonymity, is counteracted by traders' use of social networks. These are networks that traders use both to access the market, i.e., to get a job, but also to work the market on any given day. Zaloom goes on to argue that another kind of space is developed in electronic trading rooms where attention is aimed at the screens instead of at the other traders. She describes this as a move away from shared territorial proximity to shared digital proximity.

The second form is *technology* (which she later renames *socio-technical arrangements*). Financial market technologies, says Zaloom, shape the way traders act and think about what they do. Markets, she continues, are made up of technical devices, techniques and institutional arrangements. Managers and software designers strategically organize different

socio-technical arrangements in order to produce individual calculation and competition while simultaneously ridding the market of any social ties. In open outcry trading this has to do with 'the architecture of the trading pits, the bodies and voices of traders, traders' social hierarchies and the skill of exploiting them, for profit, the structure of the CBOT building, and the structure of the Chicago Board of Trade itself as a membership organization' (pp. 168–169). In digital dealing, technology relates to 'the social composition of the trading room, the skill of reading a social field from a computer representation, and techniques for constructing information among traders in the dealing room' (p. 169). Again, there is a change of direction taking place: a move away from the market as embodied in traders (in the pit), towards the market as numbers on a screen (in the digital dealing room).

The third form is *social composition*. Here she describes and compares the pit traders in Chicago and the dealing room traders in London. In Chicago, family ties are important for getting a job and for working the market. In the London-office, the managers strategically set out to design a new breed of traders. Based on certain ideas of the links between multiculturalism and successful trading, traders from various ethnic backgrounds and with higher levels of education were hired to work alongside the old school traders that often came from a working-class background.

Inspired by Michel Foucault, Zaloom then introduces *selves* as the fourth form. She describes a financial market self defined by a particular kind of rationality. In order to become this rational self, traders need to be disciplined in different ways and this is done through technology, architecture and design, management strategies, a particular way of interacting with numbers on the screen, the market, and with other selves busy crafting their

own selves in a similar manner. In particular, the trader needs to learn how to separate the world of social responsibilities from the world of speculation.

The fifth form is *representation*. This order 'defines the spaces of purified economic activity and shapes the affect and self-image of those engaged in trading' (p. 174). Examples of this are the architecture of buildings, and the traders' clothes. Zaloom argues that 'these representations are part of the practical experiments that separate economic activities from the social' (p. 174).

Zaloom describes two opposing directions at work in these different forms. On the one hand, we have the strategies of managers and designers directed at autonomous economic action, and on the other hand we have the strategies of the traders directed at bringing 'social and cultural material back into the rationalized market, producing a cultured structure that organizes everyday life and labor in the futures market' (p. 177).

Zaloom introduces these five forms in order to account for how financial life and the rationality of economic man is shaped and worked upon, but her use of these forms, although compelling, is somewhat unclear. The forms move in and out of each other – both as analytical and empirical constructs, and she uses the same features to exemplify different forms. This does not have to be a problem but becomes one when she is not explicit as to why this crossing between forms occurs. If *space* and *representation* both have to do with the sounds and sights of trading and the *self*, why are distinctions made between different forms? What sets them apart as 'elementary forms'?

I am also not sure why she replaces the concept of *technology* with the concept of *socio-technical arrangements* in the concluding chapter (pp. 166–171) without any further elaboration. When 'techno-

logy' is substituted for 'socio-technical arrangements', the latter becomes a form that can easily encompass the other four, or be understood as an aggregate of them. The strength of the concept of socio-technical arrangements, as I see it, is that it allows us to ask questions about the various relations, materials, designs, organizations and humans that Zaloom so thoroughly describes in the other forms. When placed alongside these forms the concept of socio-technical arrangements loses some of its strength and potential.

Apart from being about traders and technology, the book can also be read as an example of anthropology of finance in the making. Financial markets and anthropology share a fairly short common history and its future direction is up for grabs. Zaloom suggests that anthropologists need to move beyond the idea of markets as either 'rational economic tools' or 'engines of chaos'. By attending to the five elementary forms, an anthropology of finance and exchange can tell us something about the culture of markets. I concur, but further conceptual work is needed before we can do this.

Anna Hasselström

Stockholm University, Sweden

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Allaine Cerwonka & Liisa H. Malkki.

2007. *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*. University of Chicago Press. xi + 203 pp.

Improvising Theory by Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki makes a uniquely conversational contribution to the literature on ethnographic fieldwork. At the centre of the book is the e-mail correspondence between Cerwonka and Malkki in 1994–1995. At the time, Cerwonka was a PhD student of political science at

the University of California at Irvine, and Malkki an assistant professor of anthropology at the same school. Since Cerwonka wanted to study Australian nationalism through ethnographic fieldwork – a method not commonly used in political science – Malkki was appointed her mentor. The e-mail correspondence retraces how Cerwonka's work in Australia unfolded and how Malkki advised her on various methodological problems, especially those that arose from Cerwonka's 'vulnerable interdisciplinarity' (p. 122). The book presents these exchanges in chronological order and at (almost) unabridged length. The correspondence is framed by Cerwonka's pre-fieldwork research proposal and two single-authored essays on interdisciplinary research and on ethnographic improvisation.

The book is *uneven* by design, on several levels. Instead of a polished presentation of best methodological practice, it shows how ethnography traverses rough and rocky terrains. Instead of hiding the emotional ups and downs of the fieldwork experience, it keeps anxious moments, lucky flukes, and private chitchat firmly in the picture. The book is also uneven in the contributions of each of the authors, as there are no jointly written conclusions. And instead of presenting an exchange between equals, this is an uneven dialogue between an expert and a novice. The institutionally formal relation between Malkki and Cerwonka ensures that good etiquette is upheld: despite its frankness, *Improvising Theory* is not a Malinowskian 'diary in the strict sense of the term.'

The e-mails hold advice usually not contained in standard textbooks. For example, the authors discuss how to deal with secrecy and revelation among respondents who believe that their illegal and unethical practices will be exposed (Cerwonka worked with police officers). They talk about what kinds of books

should be read during fieldwork: other ethnographies, Dostoyevsky's collected works, or no books at all? The e-mail exchange stops at the point where Cerwonka returns to the US, hence it does not give an insight into that other great mystery of ethnography: how do you turn the scattered heap of diary notes, jottings, recorded interviews and photographs into a coherent thesis? Malkki tells Cerwonka that returning from fieldwork requires a much longer period of readjustment than other methodologies. More advice of this kind would have been useful, and could be the focus of a future book on writing-up ethnography in a similarly conversational style.

Through the messages and Malkki's essay, it becomes beautifully clear why ethnography is an art of improvisation. Pre-fieldwork students are commonly told that they should not get bogged down by their initial research proposal; to return from fieldwork with the same ideas and methods as declared in the proposal would be a sure sign of failure. This book shows why constant invention is an irreducible part of the encounters between the ethnographer and local respondents. Malkki draws comparisons to jazz music: like improvisational jazz, fieldwork also happens in front of a live audience. Where the improvisation will lead cannot be known from the start. Like jazz musicians, ethnographers 'riff' themes of anthropological predecessors from the particular viewpoint of their fieldwork (p. 184). The improvisational nature of ethnography marks its difference from many other forms of social research. For example, ethnography cannot be subjected to the same kinds of ethics reviews as, say, survey research because one cannot know from the onset all the people one will talk to and what kinds of questions one is going to ask them (p. 179).

While *Improvising Theory* is surely about

'improvisation,' it is not about 'theory.' *Improvising Methodology* would have been a more accurate, if less exciting, title for this book. Cerwonka's essay puts ethnography into the hermeneutic tradition and discusses at length Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical works. But questions of how to 'theorize' ethnography are hardly addressed. It is certainly true that anthropology makes 'principled eclectic' use of theory (p. 118), yet the reader learns little about how to think through ethnographic findings with social theory. Doctoral students in anthropology are often told that they should not worry too much about 'theory' until they get back from fieldwork. Despite its own best intentions, *Improvising Theory* seems to confirm this guidance.

Stefan Ecks

University of Edinburgh, UK

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Dorothy Holland et al. 2007. *Local Democracy under Siege: Activism, Public Interests and Private Politics*. New York University Press. xiv + 302 pp.

This book is politically sharp and urgent, a timely and well-argued criticism of neo-liberal politics and rhetoric, that shows how they undermine (what is left of) democracy in the United States of America. However, it suffers from shortcomings. These do not invalidate the conclusions drawn but disappoint and irritate an ethnographically minded reader.

The first word of the subtitle, activism, suggests a study with an activist perspective, focusing on citizens' activities and points of view. The back cover and the introductory chapters reinforce this impression, by emphasizing the importance of ethnographic methods and purposes and promising a non-elite approach. Just 'public interest and private politics' would have been better as a subtitle to alert

readers to the type of political criticism, based on local data that is in fact offered.

The authors have done anthropological fieldwork in five communities of North Carolina. Their misgivings about the consequences of present political trends in the US are well documented with facts from these communities, and the significance of the local facts in the light of wider processes is analyzed and convincingly formulated. The study shows how economic discourses and business practices have invaded processes of deliberation, resource allocation, and visions of the future of a community or a region and how this limits accountability and transparency. Businessmen become 'super-citizens'.

What is lacking is detailed description of non-elite political participation. The ethnography they mention over and over as basic to their work is presented mostly in the form of apt illustrations in quotes against a background of statistics and institutional information plus some, but not sufficient, context. Cases are described in a very summary form. To take one example, we are told who is invited to participate in a community task force, how it is set up, by whom and for which purposes, how meeting methods and atmosphere change over time and how the final report is written up. All of this over perhaps two pages, no more. In other words, essential information is offered, but there is no sense of an anthropological presence, and no self-reflection at all.

Only five case studies of citizen activism are described and only in chapter 10 (out of 11), over only 32 pages. In contrast, examples of institutional arrangements, such as public-private partnerships, task forces, urban revitalization programs, etc., are devoted plenty of space. Their workings and their consequences are carefully reported. This is important and

it is convincingly carried through, but it leaves an impression of precisely the sort of top-down political science perspective that the authors claim to want to avoid in favor of an ethnographic grass roots perspective.

The case studies offer information on motives, strategies and barriers to participation. And the final chapter plus the appendix offer theoretically valid and politically crucial conclusions. But the authors are more interested in awakening US opinion, it seems, than in analyzing detailed ethnographic data or exploring social theory. They even include six pages of specific recommendations for activists.

Instead of presenting the data from the five communities studied, one by one, they have organized the book according to themes, such as race, education and visions of the future. There are some gains to be had from this and from the collective effort. The issues under scrutiny are large, complex and important, they are competently handled, and the seven authors have pooled their merits and insights to create and make credible scathing criticism of what is going on. Each one of them could probably have written a much subtler ethnography where less predictable perspectives and issues could have contributed more to further our understanding of political processes. Nonetheless, their analysis of the present situation of their country, especially the democratic potentials of local activism and the dangers of what they call the American plutocracy stands on a solid base of collective knowledge.

To sum up their message: The powers that be exploit and marginalize citizens; market logics limit the accessibility of public services; economic thinking is undermining democracy; the present hegemonic discourses and economic inequalities make it easy for the powerful

to cover up their breaches of democratic honesty; and these processes have created a vicious circle, since they increase the inequalities in the distribution of all kinds of resources, including those necessary for citizens to be active. But there is hope in participatory experiments and local associations. At a minimum, the idea of politics needs to be expanded beyond electoral processes if the ongoing undermining of democracy is to be stopped.

Britt-Marie Thurén
Mid-Sweden University
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Sarah LeVine & David N. Gellner. 2005. *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. xvi + 378 pp.

Different aspects of the complex phenomenon variously referred to as 'Buddhist modernism', 'modernist Buddhism' and 'Protestant Buddhism' have attracted considerable academic interest in recent years. This has resulted in a growing awareness that many contemporary forms of Buddhism (as well as the concept 'Buddhism' itself) are, to a large extent, fairly recent constructions and the products of intricate relationships between the Buddhist cultures of South and East Asia on the one hand, and the influences of western colonialism, Christian missionary activities, and the curatorship of orientalist scholarship on the other. Although one can find many similarities between the trajectories along which different Buddhisms have developed since the 19th Century, Buddhist modernism is also a highly heterogeneous phenomenon. It can be seen as a transnational 'movement', but this has often been obscured by a multitude of local and particular expressions. While certain

contexts have been explored in depth (e.g. the rise of 'Protestant Buddhism' in Sri Lanka, or the connections between modernity, religion and nationalism in Japan) there are still many lacunae in the history and anthropology of modern Buddhism. The collaborative work of Sarah LeVine and David Gellner, presented in *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal*, is therefore a most welcome addition to the literature on this subject, as well as a timely contribution to the ethnography of Nepal.

For the non-expert, Nepalese religion can appear as a somewhat confusing mélange of Hindu and Buddhist elements, sometimes difficult to distinguish. While the country was formerly a constitutionally declared Hindu state, two distinct forms of Buddhism have nevertheless had a long history in Nepal: Tibetan Vajrayana, and the domestic form of Vajrayana/Mahayana tantrism known as 'Newar Buddhism'. The former is quite well known among anthropologists thanks to the work of Ortner (e.g. 1989), while Gellner (e.g. 1992) has written about the latter, which is characterized by some uncommon features, most prominently a system of hereditary, married 'householder monks' within a complex caste system. Much less known is the relatively recent introduction of Theravada Buddhism. As *Rebuilding Buddhism* convincingly demonstrates, this has nevertheless been a significant influence on Nepalese Buddhism, and a challenge to traditional Newar religion. The establishment of Theravada monasteries in Nepal can serve as an indicator: While none existed in 1930, the book contains an appendix listing 98 *viharas*, including 17 nunneries (pp. 297–300). Lay-oriented *vipassana* meditation in the Goenka tradition, non-sectarian but with a close connection to Theravada teachings, also attracts vast

numbers of retreatants (pp. 216–224). These examples highlight some central aspects of Buddhist modernism: The importance of female monastics, despite their problematic status, the changing role and ‘monasticization’ of Buddhist laity, and the growing popularity of an anti-ritualistic, soteriological form of Buddhist practice, all of which are contextualized and given a thorough treatment in *Rebuilding Buddhism*.

The book opens with an account of the life of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), a charismatic Sinhalese preacher and ‘key figure in the development of modern Sinhala nationalism’, who also managed to ‘set most of the agenda for Buddhist modernism (p. 7).’ As such, Dharmapala not only influenced an Asian self-understanding of Buddhism; as a global missionary and the only representative of the ‘Southern Buddhist Church’, Dharmapala also made a deep impression on his audience at the 1893 ‘World Parliament of Religions’ in Chicago, where he presented a vision of Buddhism as a religion uniquely compatible with both science and sociopolitical change – ‘modernist’ notions still alive and well within an increasingly globalized Buddhist discourse. The authors proceed to outline Dharmapala’s revivalist Buddhism, paying due attention to its pronounced anti-Hindu stance. The Introduction ends with an overview of the role of female ascetics and the various strategies employed to re-establish a functioning nuns’ order.

Chapter 2 provides a historical background to the Theravada Buddhist movement in Nepal, beginning in the 19290s and told through the life stories of some

of its pioneers, set against a background of a hostile social and political situation. Chapters 3 through 8 trace more recent developments in the growing Theravada movement during the more open climate of the post-Rana period, dealing with both monastic and lay forms of practice. The concluding two chapters adopt a wider perspective, dealing with other forms of Buddhist revivalism in Nepal and the way traditional Newar Buddhism has responded to the presence of Theravada Buddhism before discussing the future of Buddhism in the region.

Rebuilding Buddhism weaves together historical and sociological perspectives with biographical and ethnographic material in a way this reviewer finds very attractive, and its authors fulfill their stated purpose to ‘provide as rich and as many-sided an ethnography and ethnographic history of this local form of Buddhist modernism as possible’ (p. xi). The book is also a nice complement to other recent studies of female Buddhist monasticism, and could also serve as an excellent introduction for anyone interested in the transnational networks that have shaped contemporary Buddhism.

Per Drougge

Stockholm University, Sweden

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