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The Project in the Model

Reciprocity, Social Capital, and the Politics of Ethnographic Realism

by Susana Narotzky

Concepts such as “reciprocity,” “embeddedness,” and “social capital” have been the main tools for description and analysis of social relations sustaining economic activities in areas defined as regional economies or industrial districts, becoming models for successful development in Europe. Historicizing these concepts, stressing the concrete political agendas of the scholars who produced them, reveals them as paradoxical in that, though they are abstract, their main force lies in their social, cultural, historical, and spatial situatedness. This situation points to the awkwardness of “ethnographic realism” and the need for a kind of “reflexive historical realism” to enhance viable anthropological communication.

Economic activities in areas of decentralized production such as southern Europe, structured around informal subcontracting networks, small family firms, and the “worker-entrepreneur,” cannot be properly described or explained in terms of the standard categories of sociological description of the “economic” domain in Western capitalist societies. Indeed, most relationships structuring production and social reproduction are highly ambiguous with regard to standard categories: many workers are often both employed (they work for wages informally) and unemployed (they get government subsidies); many do both wage and non-wage work in family workshops; many are motivated to engage in particular production relations both by interest and emotion, by market and domestic or other non-contractual, moral feelings of responsibility (Narotzky 2001*b*; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Sanchis 1984; Benton 1990; Blim 1990; Yanagisako 2002; Ghezzi 2005). The centrality of this messy reality for the organization of production prevailing in these areas and the intellectual tools designed to approach it raises two related methodological issues for the ethnographer or social scientist.

The first of these is how we are to deal with the tension between specificity and abstraction central to the concepts we have developed to deal with these “informal” economic phenomena. This is a central issue of scientific endeavor and has been dealt with as such by philosophers and historians of

science (Chalmers 1982). What interests me here is the paradox represented by concepts such as “reciprocity,” “embeddedness,” and “social capital,” whose main descriptive and explicative force lies precisely in their absolute specificity—their social, cultural, and spatial situatedness.

The second is the relevance of intellectuals’ particular political projects for the development of abstract concepts. Through their ordinary participation in the political struggles of their day, social scientists’ commonsense views of their lived experience get entangled in the production of scientific concepts, with the result that the categories used for description and analysis become part of different political projects that treat abstraction and causality in particular oriented ways. Both these issues are linked to the issues of objectification and realism and their political significance for anthropological work.

Politics in anthropology is not a new problem (Gledhill 1994, 207–27). Its early developments are linked to awareness of the colonial aspect of both the ethnographic encounter and the theoretical framework positing the objectification of the “other” (Hymes 2002 [1969]; Asad et al. 1973; Trouillot 1991; Fabian 1983). The implications for the peoples anthropologists studied were seriously taken into account, and the anthropologist’s relation with them was politically addressed. A deontological and ethical charter was proposed that transformed the practice of anthropology (Gough 1968, 1993; Berreman 1968). The debate over ethics and forms of political engagement, including new issues of “accountability,” continues to this day (Scheper-Hughes 1998; Smith 1999; Strathern 2000; Shore and Wright 2000; Amit 2000; Pels 2000; Mills

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2003). Another strand of thought on this issue develops from the power/knowledge articulation that Foucault (1981) and his followers have addressed by trying to make explicit the processes of production of particular regimes of truth. Here an insurgent political position was predicated on the uncovering of “subjugated knowledges” that were silenced in the process of establishing “scientific” truth. In anthropology, the articulation of this perspective with Geertz’s hermeneutical turn (1973) had some long-lasting epistemological consequences, generally stressing a constructivist vision of reality and a literary and performative understanding of the anthropologist’s practice. This has produced explicitly nonrealist (i.e., nonrepresentational) ethnographies of various experimental narrative modalities highlighting (1) authorial reflexivity and (2) heteroglossic, nonobjectifying, evocative accounts of the ethnographic experience. Often, in this radically creative process, context is left out (Strathern 1987), and the reader is at pains to grasp the fact that for the actors in the narrative there are actual referents of people struggling to get by in “real life.” The practical political consequences of post-modern heteroglossia in anthropological work and the shrinking of authorial responsibility that it entails are beyond the scope of this paper. Although authorial reflexivity and narrative self-consciousness are no doubt important issues, it is doubtful that they should become *the* main issue of the anthropologist’s work.

An attempt at a form of reflexivity that remains firmly grounded in practice is found in Bourdieu’s notions of “objectifying objectivation” and “participant objectivation” (Bourdieu 1980a, 51–70; 2003a, 2003b). In an interview with Wacquant (1989, 33) he speaks of “the possibility of a full sociological objectivation of the object *and* of the subject’s relation to the object.” This last brand of “objectivation” echoes what Strathern underlines was present in Malinowski’s ethnography and produced a revolutionary turn in anthropological practice and theory: “From the start the modern ethnographers sought to dislodge the taken-for-granted status of Western concepts” (Strathern 1987, 260; see also Terradas 1993). Bourdieu is acutely aware that scientific objects are constructed as objects by the researcher’s empirical relations in the scientific and other social fields (*champs*). However, he does not renounce “science.” His project aims at eliciting the social logic of the “scientific field.” This reflexivity is a *collective* endeavor, based on “rational polemics” and “dialogic confrontation” among participants in the field (Bourdieu 2003b, 172).¹ In the social sciences, then, there is a permanent tension between subject and object because the subject’s position can only be situated in the social ob-

ject.² This form of critical reflexivity is situated in the scientific field and addresses its power/knowledge dilemmas from within it.

My present thoughts develop from this intellectual debate and confront me with two pressing questions: What were the political projects of the scholars who developed some of the concepts that I had at my disposal when I went to the field? How does the “politicized” process of conceptualization affect anthropological research in the present?

Both the problem of the tension of specificity and abstraction in particular concepts and the issue of the political projects hidden in the concepts seem to me to reveal the awkwardness of ethnographic realism. I wish to confront these issues in order to identify, notwithstanding, some of the potentialities of ethnographic realism for anthropological work. However reflexive we seek to be, the attempt to arrive at explicative propositions—or interpretive narratives—about phenomena that we have observed and experienced during fieldwork rests implicitly or explicitly on some kind of realist axiom that makes communication and polemics possible. Therefore the issue of realism is not fully exhausted by constructivist positions. How, then, is one to approach this reality? What concepts are to be used in its description? How can one compare it with apparently (intuitively) similar phenomena present in other places? How is one to develop explanatory hypotheses? In sum, the issue is a crucial methodological one: Is it possible to maintain the specificity in description that the social relations of production in the “informal” economy require while at the same time creating abstract concepts that allow comparison and therefore the production of explanatory models? And how can we design abstract concepts that are not invalidated by our political project?

I intend to show that social scientists produce abstractions according to the explicit or implicit political views of society they favor. This does not imply that their accounts are incommensurable (and thus useless from a scientific perspective) or that reality is unassailable because it depends on individual or collective interpretations. It seems to me that the reflexive stand of the present-day social scientist aims at the communication of different descriptions, explanations, and interpretations of reality in such a way as to produce, in the end, some sense of a reality that goes beyond concrete subjective human will (Bourdieu 2003b).

Ethnographic Troubles

In the spring of 1991 I was asked to become the research partner of Gavin Smith in a project entitled “Informal Economic Activity in Western Europe: A Historical and Comparative Study.” The fieldwork that we planned was a “re-

1. “It is from this logic, intrinsically social, . . . that any progress toward greater reflexivity may be forthcoming—a reflexivity imposed by the effects of mutual objectification and not by a mere turning, more or less narcissistic, of subjectivities upon themselves” (Bourdieu 2003b, 72).

2. As Nagel (1974, 443), debating the subjective/objective dilemma in knowledge, proposed: “It may be more accurate to think of objectivity as a direction in which understanding can travel.” For anthropological debates of this issue see Reyna (1994), D’Andrade (1995), and Spiro (1996).

visit” in many of the ways that Burawoy (2003) points to in his “Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography.” For Smith it was a “punctuated revisit” in that he had previously spent 1978–79 doing fieldwork in the area of the Vega Baja (Alicante, Spain) where we planned to return. As for myself, I had worked (1985–87) for my doctoral thesis in another region, Les Garrigues (Lleida, Spain). The two regions were similar in some ways—combining informal manufacturing with petty capitalist farming—but also had important differences in land tenure history, household organization, inheritance patterns, and the differentiation and articulation of local and national capitalist developments. This project, then, represented for me what Burawoy terms a “heuristic revisit” stressing comparison, but the comparative aspect was also built into the project, as was the “archeological revisit” aspect so typical of ethnographies of “market and democratic transitions” that highlight the relationship between past and present (Burawoy 2003, 672). Moreover, both the “realist” and the “constructivist” aspects that Burawoy identifies were present in our problematization of the object of study, initially framed as “informal economic activity.” Theoretically our perspective was one of political economy *à la* Eric Wolf (1982), William Roseberry (1989), and David Harvey (1999 [1982]), to mention but the most significant influences in our thought.

However, as we proceeded through the literature dealing with the Western European “informal economy” we became aware of the ubiquity of “regional” and “cultural” aspects (Bagnasco 1977; Brusco and Sabel 1981; Sabel 1989; Becattini 1992; Amin and Thrift 1992; Benton 1990; Blim 1990; Piore and Sabel 1984; see also Yanagisako 2002 and Ghezzi 2005 for later examples). Three elements were recurrently highlighted as characterizing the “region” as a particular form of economic organization: (1) space—propinquity of the various units of production involved in a particular industrial branch, agglomeration, cluster, and district; (2) scale—small dimensions, in terms of capital investment and labor force employed, of the units of production, which did not preclude innovation and entrepreneurial autonomy; and (3) culture—a particular history of local social ties and mutual-responsibility links building trust, including kinship, friendship, and community identity. Also highlighted in the literature were institutionalized forms of political and economic organization such as the technical colleges sponsored by the Italian Communist Party in some municipalities (Bologna being the paradigmatic case) and the *mezzadria* (sharecropping) history of the Third Italy regions, which had produced a “culture” of induced work incentives that became the building blocks of the local worker-entrepreneur or petty capitalist.

These three elements appeared in the literature as the key to a “new” form of organized capitalism particularly adapted to the heralded “flexibility” of the post-Fordist era (for a critique see Pollert 1991) and one that induced in workers and firm owners a “natural,” harmonious form of cooperation given that they were already linked through noncontractual

forms of mutual responsibility (Piore and Sabel 1984; Becattini 1992). Not everybody was a supporter of this view, and critiques were soon to point to the less-than-ideal situation of many of the participants (Blim 1990), the myth of entrepreneurial autonomy in the context of increasing global integration of development and growth (Amin and Thrift 1992; Belussi 1997), the diversity of regional economies in organizational structure and economic success, and the policy-orienting consequences of adopting this model (Hadjimi-chaelis and Papamichos 1990).³

However, supporters and detractors alike pointed to the particular quality of the social relations that sustained the networks of this form of organized petty capitalism in Western Europe. The concepts used to describe them were “reciprocity,” “embeddedness,” and “social capital,” and the institutions in which they were identified included “family,” “friendship,” and “community.” What was troubling to me, at that point, was the awareness that although these concepts obviously said something to the scholar reading the accounts, one received no clear idea what the *actual* relationship being described or referred to was like. Both the relation concepts and the institution concepts they were associated with transmitted a positive moral atmosphere or feeling about a range of undifferentiated actions and transactions and their conscious interpretations by social actors. They did not *explain* much, although one had the impression of understanding what was going on. Contributing to the paradoxical nature of this phenomenon was the fact that these very *general* relation concepts were meant to stand for very *specific* sets of profoundly historicized and localized human interactions. The oxymoron was extreme and ubiquitous not only in the scholarly literature but, as we subsequently discovered, in policy making and the discourse of the people we met in the field. As we have reported elsewhere (Narotzky and Smith 2006, 10), this

made us conscious that we must understand two rather different phenomena simultaneously: the practices and relations we could find in a loosely predefined economic area, and the economic models for developing regions along the lines of networks, social markets, flexible firms, and so on that experts and policymakers in Europe are generating today. Moreover, we soon recognized a dialectical relation between the two levels, for developmental policies (regulatory or deregulating practices, subsidies, etc.) were providing crucial conditions giving direction to the practices and relations we were seeing in the field.

In our fieldwork research and account we tried to deal with the dialectical nature of scholarly concepts and institutional and everyday practices and interpretations (Smith 2006). We also tried to unveil the history of human interaction that was glossed over by the relation concepts generally used. We did not, however, delve into the social production of these very

3. For an analysis of the development of the “regional economy” concept and its connection with European policies, see Smith (2006).

general-*cum*-specific concepts that seemed so useful in describing a form of capitalist organization hailed by policy makers and influential scholars as a model for regional development.

Concepts and Political Projects

Social scientists have labeled this localized and widely distributed economic organization “informal economy,” “industrial district,” “economic region,” and *economia diffusa*, depending on the aspect to be highlighted: labor relations, entrepreneurial activity, networks of cooperation, spatial character, etc.⁴ The three concepts that have become central to the description and explanation of these widely observed economic phenomena—reciprocity, embeddedness, and social capital—seek to address in different ways the tension between specificity and abstraction. Anthropologists have been acquainted with reciprocity (Durkheim, Malinowski, Mauss) and embeddedness (Polanyi) for a long time and have used them to capture the ambiguity of relationships that appeared to hinge on the simultaneous action of “economic” (material interest, rational allocation of resources) and “noneconomic” (moral, emotional, “social”) forces. However, the problem remains that these abstract concepts are meant to describe substantively specific social relationships. The question then becomes: What is the selective procedure that highlights certain elements in the process of production of a useful abstract concept, and, more important, what are the consequences of this selection for the ethnographic work of description and analysis that will allow scientific comparison?

Reciprocity

The concept of reciprocity has been criticized in anthropology for not being clearly defined and thus not being sufficiently “stable” to allow comparison (MacCormack 1976). It is a “vague” concept describing transfers between individuals or groups and hinting at a moral motivation although not en-

4. The phenomenon of the “industrial district” was produced as a sociological reality in the 1970s (although it revived a description by Alfred Marshall at the turn of the century). It first described the economic organization of some northern regions of Italy that did not respond to the industrial Fordist model or to the “backward traditional” model of the southern agrarian *mezzogiorno*, a highly successful network of small firms linked by horizontal cooperation ties forged by long-standing non-economic community relations. This economic model was called the Terza Italia (Third Italy, a label reminiscent of the various “third-way” attempts at conceiving a project for social organization). It is significant, moreover, that most “third-way” attempts at producing alternative social models have been of the “organic” type, from the social doctrine of the church at the turn of the twentieth century through republican solidarism and fascism to present-day third-way and social-capital proponents. They are similar in that they all aim at maintaining capitalist market-led relations of production while solving the “social question,” that is, the social unrest created by the necessary differentiation those very relations produce. They differ in the means employed to reach these common objectives and therefore in the procedural structures of governance developed. However, they all stress the importance of personalized relationships between agents and the specificity of community contexts.

tirely devoid of material interest. I have elsewhere (Narotzky 2001a) addressed its inherent ambiguity. Here I want to point to the political projects that made it a central one in economic anthropology.

At the core of the incipient concept of reciprocity, in Durkheim (2002a [1893], 105, 165–73), Malinowski (1961 [1922], 96–97, 167, 175), and Mauss (2002a [1923–24], 2002b [1931], 5–10),⁵ we find—implicit or explicit—“third-way” political projects that attempt to present an alternative to both economic liberalism and Bolshevism. In the context of nineteenth-century French *solidarisme*,⁶ Durkheim’s model of organic solidarity for complex societies is not only an assertion about the articulation of interests brought about by the division of labor but also an attempt to recover the idea of a moral obligation between members of society whereby individuals are reciprocally responsible for their collective well-being. This idea of society’s being produced as the result of moral obligation—not just material interest—is at the base of the concept of reciprocity. In Durkheim, this way of producing society is contrasted with the mechanical solidarity of the inherent force of collective emotions.

Both Malinowski and Mauss show that in primitive societies as well there exists a division of social labor (instead of an “amorphous” horde, “polysegmentary” societies) and that reciprocity, the mix of exchange and moral obligation, an endless chain of transfers that produces solidarity and cooperation, is the kernel of social cohesion in general. Although they both refer to primitive societies in their ethnographic material and their analysis, in fact the theory they present (of reciprocity as the glue of society, which is Durkheim’s hypothesis for nonprimitive society) is a *universal* theory of social cohesion (Mauss 2002b [1931]; Malinowski 1971 [1926]) in which reciprocity has become a general concept.

5. The sequence of development of the anthropological concept of reciprocity is (1) Durkheim (1975a [1909], 1975b [1917], 2002a [1893], 2002b [1893]), (2) Malinowski (1961 [1922]), (3) Mauss (2002a [1923–24]), (4) Malinowski (1971 [1926]), and (5) Mauss (2002b [1931]).

6. Solidarism was an attempt to control the ills of unbridled individualism either through the realization of a mystic humanitarian communion (Leroux 1840) or through a quasi-contractual juridical construction sustained by the state (Bourgeois 1912; see also Masson 2002; Donzelot 1984). In Durkheim (2002b [1893], 136), “We may say that everything that is a source of solidarity is moral, everything that forces man to take others into account, to adjust his movements according to something other than the impulses of his egoism, and morality is the firmer the more numerous and the stronger these links” (Est moral, peut-on dire, tout ce qui est source de solidarité, tout ce qui force l’homme à compter avec autrui, à régler ses mouvements sur autre chose que les impulsions de son égoïsme, et la moralité est d’autant plus solide que ces liens sont plus nombreux et plus forts). And he adds (p. 142), “However, if division of labor produces solidarity, it is not only because it makes every individual someone who exchanges, as the economists like to say; it is because it creates between men an entire system of rights and duties that ties one to the other in a durable way” (Mais si la division du travail produit la solidarité, ce n’est pas seulement parce qu’elle fait de chaque individu un échangeur comme disent les économistes; c’est qu’elle crée entre les hommes tout un système de droits et de devoirs qui les lient les uns aux autres d’une manière durable).

Moreover, in both writers we find a reference to individualist liberalism and collectivist communism as the two extremes against which the idea of a primitive social organization articulated by moral obligation is constructed (Mauss 2002a [1923–24], Malinowski 1961 [1922], 96–97). For Mauss this is explicitly a model that should be recovered. In it reciprocity is a universal social principle geared toward accomplishing peace and harmony in society and among societies (Mauss 2002b [1931], 12–14). It is also a principle based on the force of *specific* moral obligations of structural groups (tied to gender, age, locality, kinship, profession, etc.) that criss-cross the social fabric and transcend individual interest but, because they are only a part of society, are forced to mutual solidarity.⁷

Following Durkheim's lead in his works on moral philoso-

7. Malinowski (1971 [1926]) and Mauss (2002b, 4–5) are critical of the “romantic idea” of an original form of social organization based on mechanical solidarity: “We all began with a slightly romantic idea of the origin of societies: the complete amorphousness of the horde, later of the clan; the communisms that follow from it. It took us several decades to put aside perhaps not the entire idea but a sizable part of these ideas. We have to see the organized aspects of social segments and how the internal organization of these segments, together with the general organization of these segments among themselves, constitutes the general life of society” (Nous sommes tous partis d’une idée un peu romantique de la souche originaire des sociétés: l’amorphisme complet de la horde, puis du clan; les communismes qui en découlent. Nous avons mis peut-être plusieurs décades à nous défaire, je ne dis pas de toute l’idée, mais d’une partie notable de ces idées. Il faut voir ce qu’il y a d’organisés dans les segments sociaux, et comment l’organisation interne de ces segments, plus l’organisation générale de ces segments entre eux, constitue la vie générale de la société).

Mauss continues (p. 8), It is “here—in opposition to the problem of community and within it—that the issue of reciprocity or, inversely, that of the community’s forcing reciprocity is raised” (C’est ici que se pose—par opposition au problème de la communauté et à l’intérieur de celui-ci—le problème de la réciprocité ou inversement celui de la communauté obligeant à la réciprocité).

And finally (pp. 13–14), “Let’s conclude about this last group of facts: peace among subgroups. To raise this question for archaic societies is not useless for understanding our own societies, and it might even allow us—what we are rarely allowed—to propose some conclusions about moral politics . . . first attenuating the ordinary ideas concerning the original amorphousness of societies and then rendering more complex the ideas concerning the need to make our modern societies increasingly more harmonious. Many subgroups should be created and others constantly reinforced, professional ones in particular, which do not exist or are insufficient; finally, they must be left to mutually adjust, naturally if possible, under state authority when necessary but in any case with the state’s knowledge and under its control” (Concluons sur ce dernier groupe de faits: la paix entre les sous-groupes. Soulever cette question à propos des sociétés archaïques n’est pas inutile à la compréhension de nos sociétés à nous, et même nous permet peut-être—ce que nous permettons rarement—de proposer des conclusions de morale politique. . . . d’abord d’atténuer les idées courantes concernant l’amorphisme originaire des sociétés; et ensuite de compliquer au contraire les idées concernant la nécessité d’harmoniser de plus en plus nos sociétés modernes. Il y faut créer nombre de sous-groupes, en renforcer constamment d’autres, professionnels en particulier, inexistants ou insuffisamment existants; on doit les laisser enfin s’ajuster les uns aux autres, naturellement, si possible, sous l’autorité de l’État en cas de besoin, à sa connaissance et sous son contrôle, en tout cas).

phy (1975a [1909], 1975b [1917]) and in the *Division du travail social* (2002a, 2002b [1893]), Mauss⁸ formulates his political project in the much-commented-on conclusions to the *Essai sur le don* (2002a [1923–24]) but also in such seminal articles as *La cohésion sociale* (2002b [1931]), where he tries to show the usefulness of the “primitive model” for contemporary politics. My point, however, is to turn this evidence upside down. Mauss’s theoretical project, which produced the anthropological concept of reciprocity, is informed by a particular cooperativist, third-way political project from the start (Mauss 1997). *It is this political project that forces abstraction into concrete ethnographic descriptions.*⁹ It is the political project that designs the concept as a set of characteristic bundles of transfers and moral obligations pertaining to specific moral domains but capable of being abstracted into a universal principle of social cohesion that can be put to use. The general political debate over solidarism and cooperativism in France in the nineteenth century is the concrete historical background of this concept (Bourgeois 1912; Mauss 1997; Donzelot 1984).

The subsequent anthropological tradition has treated this concept as if it defined an abstract (value-neutral) category of social relations—those in which moral obligation is the basis of material transfers. We have used the concept whenever “standard” market-oriented forms of exchange did not seem to prevail or predominate in channeling the material circulation of goods, services, information, people. We find the concept useful because it is ambiguous, but in this lies its profound paradox: as we try to get to the intricacies of how it works, we get sucked into concrete historical specificity and away from the principle of reciprocity as a category—a *political* category. This particular domain of friendship or kinship or *that* particular sense of professional pride or collective belonging, etc., supports a *particular* form of material or other transfer, and so on. As Ignasi Terradas (2001) says, “There is

8. This is not the case for Malinowski, who does not explicitly include a political project in his ethnographic work. In the *Argonauts* (1961 [1922]) he refers at several points to primitive man as having been misconceived as guided by either an unbounded “natural acquisitive tendency” (p. 96) or a form of “primitive communism” (p. 97). However, he gets more explicit with the onset of World War II: “Culture remains sound and capable of further development only in so far as a definite balance between individual interest and social control can be maintained. If this balance is upset or wrongly poised, we have at one end anarchy, and at the other brutal dictatorship. The present world is threatened in its various parts and through different agencies both with anarchy and with the brutal oppression in which the interests of the state, managed by small gangs with dictatorial powers, are made completely to overrule the elementary rights and interests of the individual. The theoretical discussion of the relation between the individual and the group has then in our present world not merely an academic but also a philosophical and ethical significance” (Malinowski 1939, 964).

9. Third-way proposals at the time were extremely diverse and ranged from fascist corporatism and social Catholicism to socialist cooperativist projects, the main difference between them being the degree to which the political community was hierarchical or egalitarian (Mauss 1997; Rodríguez 1959; Sternhell 1987; Holmes 2000).

always more than reciprocity in reciprocity,” and it is precisely that surplus that constitutes its real substance (its intrinsic specificity).

So, to what extent does the abstract concept convey anything “real”? To what extent does its use in ethnographic description and analysis still convey (inadvertently) the political project inherent in the original concept? To the extent that it explains social phenomena by producing causal correlations of the type “moral obligation implies material transfers” or vice versa, the explanation becomes so general as to be capable of referring to almost any social relationship. It is in fact this vagueness that has made the concept so ubiquitous in economic anthropology.

Embeddedness

The concept of embeddedness has also become hegemonic in the more recent literature on regional economies. In its origins it appears very explicitly as part of a political agenda—Karl Polanyi’s attempt to explain the critical turning point of the *The Great Transformation* (1971 [1944]). Polanyi saw the commoditization of land, humans, and monies as the basis for the contemporary crisis of fascism and war (1971 [1944], 1–2, 29–30, 237–48). He identified a tripartite scheme of circulation based on the extent to which material transfers were bound by moral obligations and preexisting institutionalized social relationships (similar to Mauss’s distinction of total prestation, the gift, and market exchange). Like that of Durkheim and Mauss before him, his political stance was that alienation of the economic process from its social ties and obligations led to the annihilation of society (esp. chap. 21). His idea of fictitious commodities—labor, land, and money—pointed to the place where the impossibility of the self-regulating market resides and prepares its catastrophic end (pp. 68–75). For Polanyi, then, embeddedness was a fundamental aspect of the way in which economic processes were integrated into society as a whole; he very clearly stated that it *did not* concern the form of *individual transactions*. In societies not integrated by the market system, human economy was “embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and non-economic” (Polanyi 1957, 250; 1971 [1944], 43–55). In societies integrated by the market system, the direction of embeddedness was reversed and, with it, the moral landscape in which economic action took place: “Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system” (1971 [1944], 57). Then the economic logic of accumulation destroyed the social fabric that had to be protected by the state. His political project also pointed to the evils of both liberalism and Bolshevism (pp. 256–57) and tried to justify a socialism that upheld man’s claims to freedom in a complex society (p. 258A) in which neither total planning and control nor untrammelled individual freedom dominated. A better understanding of freedom—

one that recognized and sustained its institutional level—was needed (p. 254).¹⁰

The concept of embeddedness that pervades the sociological literature and is central to the idea of social capital is, however, enmeshed in a different political project. This present-day project is clearly related to a neoliberal economic agenda and a minimal social state. Granovetter’s (1985) idea of embeddedness, for instance, is a very instrumental notion of the production of trust through recurrent social interaction among particular individuals. In fact, Granovetter is very critical of an “oversocialized” idea of economic action in which individuals are endowed with a “generalized morality.”¹¹ From this point of view, economic action is embedded in an articulated network of *individual* social transactions in which past dealings provide the setting for the rational actor’s choice. Social relations here become transactional experience, and economic action involves choice between alternative partners in order to maximize the unwritten “trust” element of contracts. The advantage for the economic actors is a reduction of transaction costs and reduced conflict, resulting in a horizontal model of the integration of economic action.

This is a completely different concept from Polanyi’s (1971 [1944]; 1957) embeddedness. The concept of embeddedness, then, in its abstract capacity to become a category for comparison, is part of two different political projects—one closely related to the development of welfare institutions to “protect” society from the “economy” (Polanyi) and the other geared precisely to the full development of an ideology of the individual rational actor and of the economic logic of capitalist “growth” through the use of “social” ties (Granovetter).¹² We are confronted with a Janus-headed concept from the outset, a concept which pertains to very different models of how societies work and how they *should* work. Therefore the explanatory structures that may be implicit in the concept are contradictory because they are grounded in contending po-

10. “Institutions are embodiments of human meaning and purpose. We cannot achieve the freedom we seek, unless we comprehend the true significance of freedom in a complex society. On the institutional level, regulation both extends and restricts freedom; only the balance of the freedoms lost and won is significant” (Polanyi 1971 [1944], 254). “Every move towards integration in society should thus be accompanied by an increase of freedom; moves toward planning should comprise the strengthening of the rights of the individual in society. . . . The true answer to the threat of bureaucracy as a source of abuse of power is to create spheres of arbitrary freedom protected by unbreakable rules” (p. 255). “No mere declaration of rights can suffice: institutions are required to make the rights effective” (p. 256).

11. “Standard economic analysis neglects the identity and past relations of individual transactors, but rational individuals know better, relying on their knowledge of these relations. They are less interested in *general* reputations than in whether a particular other may be expected to deal honestly with *them*—mainly a function of whether they or their own contacts have had satisfactory past dealings with the other” (Granovetter 1985, 191).

12. Granovetter’s position in fact illustrates Polanyi’s hypothesis of the perversion of society by the market, in which embeddedness becomes that of “social relations in the economic system.”

litical agendas. However, anthropologists generally use the concept of embeddedness uncritically in the description or explanation of concrete economic processes found in their field sites. It is used as a vague abstraction that describes the weight of particular social institutions in the economy. As we have found with reciprocity, paradoxically, an abstract concept is used to convey the substantive weight of specific obligations.

Again we may ask ourselves, to what extent does this abstract concept convey anything “real”? To what extent can it be the basis for the comparison of the particular phenomena observed during fieldwork? To what extent does ethnographic reality become a mere “example” or representation of a sociological concept with a hidden political agenda?

Social Capital

The concept of social capital as defined by Bourdieu (1980*b*) originally refers to one of the various fields of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Capital is here understood as a “social relation,” a “social energy” that can be put in play in different fields by social actors constrained by their habitus but free to strategize. Each field has a specific logic to it that determines the “incorporated” and “objectified” capital resources to be employed efficiently in each field’s “market” (1988 [1979], 12–13). The concept of social capital seeks to explain the specific logic of the social field and its articulation with the system of social reproduction. It highlights the fact that certain forms of sociability are knowingly used and produced as long-lasting, noncontractual mutual obligations¹³ that create a sense of belonging to a group that will recurrently provide access to valuable resources (material, symbolic). These, in turn, will be articulated to other forms of capital in a general logic of accumulation specific to each field. Although it appears as an abstract concept of universal applicability, social capital in Bourdieu seems tied to a concrete economic system, capitalism, and its social reproduction (1988 [1979]; 1980*b*). It is an analytic tool developed by Bourdieu to further his radical critique of capitalist society and its forms of domination and as such is part of his political engagement in transforming social reality in an emancipatory direction (Bourdieu 2002, 2003*a*).¹⁴ In my opinion, however,

13. The concept is defined as “the ensemble of actual or potential resources that are tied to the possession of a durable web of relationships, more or less institutionalized, of inter-acquaintance and inter-acknowledgement” (Bourdieu 1980*b*, 2).

14. “A Politics that aims at transforming the structures and at neutralizing the efficiency of tendentious laws should make use of the knowledge of the probable in order to reinforce the chances of the possible: knowledge of the tendentious laws of the social world is the condition of any realistic—that is, nonutopian—action that aims at contradicting the accomplishment of these laws” (Une Politique visant à transformer les structures et à neutraliser l’efficacité des lois tendancielles devrait se servir de la connaissance du probable pour renforcer les chances du possible: la connaissance des lois tendancielles du monde social est la condition de toute action réaliste—c’est-à-dire non utopiste—visant à contrarier l’accomplissement de ces lois) (Bourdieu 2002, 147–48).

his extension of the capital/market metaphor to all fields of social action helped create the potentiality for the misappropriation of the concept of social capital that subsequently took place.

The concept of social capital that has become hegemonic in the social sciences is a development of the vague concept of embeddedness and of a particular interpretation of reciprocity (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993).¹⁵ Based on the premises of rational-action theory (a theory explicitly rejected by Bourdieu [in Wacquant 1989, 42–43]), Coleman’s social-capital concept seeks to reintroduce social context into rational action: “The conception of social capital as a resource for action is one way of introducing social structure into the rational action paradigm” (1988, S95). Social capital is a productive function of the diachronic construction of social relations between actors and of the social context—norms, social sanctions, information channels. Two complementary aspects of social relations have defined this social capital subsequently: embeddedness and autonomy, both conceived as *functions* of production. Where “embeddedness” describes the web of mutual obligations that generate trust and altruistic behavior within close-knit communities, “autonomy” describes the ability of certain individuals within the community to forge and sustain social relationships with individuals and institutions outside the community. Autonomy enables some economic agents in a community to overcome the centripetal forces and closure that are generally attributed to social and cultural proximity.¹⁶ The insistence on both embeddedness and autonomy as basic aspects of social capital points to the need to incorporate forms of social and economic differentiation into this model for successful capitalist development. Following this trend, social theorists have developed a concept of social capital attuned to a “new” development paradigm, one in which “community” relations and values are used as “capital” to forward economic development (see the works of the members of the Social Capital Initiative at the World Bank, and for a critique see Fine 2001).

For Putnam (1993, 167), the main public exponent of the political project sustained by the social-capital concept, the

15. Fine (1999, 5) has described its vagueness as follows: “It seems to be able to be *anything* ranging over public goods, networks, cultures, etc. The only proviso is that social capital should be attached to the economy in a functionally positive way for economic performance, especially growth.”

16. “Business groups in poor communities thus need to forge and maintain linkages transcending their community so that: (i) the economic and non-economic claims of community members can be resisted when they undermine (or threaten to undermine) the group’s economic viability and expansion; (ii) entry into more sophisticated factor and product markets can be secured; and (iii) individuals of superior ability and ambition within the business group itself are able to insert themselves into larger and more complex social networks. In successful bottom-up development programs . . . a community’s stock of social capital in the form of integration can be the basis for launching development initiatives, but it must be complemented over time by the construction of new forms of social capital, i.e., linkages to non-community members” (Woolcock 1998, 175).

kernel of the concept expresses two elements—norms of reciprocity and networks of civic participation. “Social capital refers to those aspects of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that might improve the efficiency of society through enabling coordinate action.” Putnam’s work has been severely criticized (see, e.g., Tarrow 1996; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes and Landolt 1996; Newton 1997; Putzel 1997). I will simply underline his insistence on the “voluntary” and “spontaneous” cooperation that social capital fosters. His political project is one that can be defined as “neoliberal corporatism,” with the state to be replaced by social capital as the main regulatory instrument.¹⁷ If we think of this concept as part of the neoliberal governance agenda, it becomes much clearer why it is now relevant to highlight (1) the instances in which moral obligation (reciprocity) substitutes for the legal or contractual obligation sanctioned by the state as a guarantor and (2) the instances in which unelected private networks of individuals (networks of civic participation) set the objectives of the “common good” and exercise control over their implementation (for a critique see Supiot 2000; Bologna 1997; Greco 1996; Bretón 2005).

However, the concept has become an abstract category used by social scientists in the field (mainly those working for development agencies such as the World Bank) to describe an enormous variety of actual social relationships and explain how they can be tapped for economic development projects and how they can constitute the base of a democratic political organization. As a concept that rests heavily on the two preceding ones, social capital participates in most of their flaws. We may ask, then, What is the value of an *abstract* universal concept whose main substantive asset is precisely the centrality of *specific* social relations that make profitable economic organization possible? Moreover, like embeddedness it is a Janus-headed concept, although the neoliberal version of it often purports to incorporate Bourdieu’s perspective.¹⁸ This latest version is, however, a concept *explicitly* geared toward social engineering of a particular kind: indeed, by conceiving all sorts of social relations in market terms it seeks to render them productive and profitable.

What, then, can this concept tell us about the feelings of

17. “In all societies, . . . dilemmas of collective action hamper attempts to cooperate for mutual benefit, whether in politics or in economics. Third-party enforcement is an inadequate solution to this problem. Voluntary cooperation (like rotating credit associations) depends on social capital. Norms of generalized reciprocity and networks of civic engagement encourage social trust and cooperation because they reduce incentives to defect, reduce uncertainty, and provide models for future cooperation. Trust itself is an emergent property of the social system, as much as a personal attribute. Individuals are able to be trusting (and not merely gullible) because of the social norms and networks within which their actions are embedded” (Putnam 1993, 177). For a critique of the perverse effects of the application of the social-capital concept in the development programs of international agencies, see Bretón (2005).

18. Indeed, Bourdieu is often included in the list of references and sometimes even acknowledged as the creator of the concept, but his version of it is not expounded.

mutual responsibility that characterize particular domains of social interaction and support particular forms of dependence, power, authority, and justice that can be used as economic factors? In fact, by reducing them all to the common denominator of “capital” we lose sight precisely of what makes them work *as different from* other—classical—forms of capital. In so doing, we inadvertently endorse the political project that is inherent in this particular selective linkage of observed correlations.

The Politics of Ethnographic Realism

The methodology of ethnographic realism stresses the paradox between the uniqueness of specificity and the necessary abstraction of scientific description on which the comparative method depends. It is this paradox that I have analyzed as being one of the central problems of the concepts currently used to describe and explain the social relationships that pervade the informal production relations of many European regional economies. We have seen that as descriptive categories these concepts all highlight the ambiguity of those relationships, emphasizing the multiplicity of domains that give meaning (often simultaneously) to the material transfers of labor, information, goods, money, etc., that take place. However, as we try to get hold of the specificities that are at work in the concrete field site we are observing, we lose the abstract contours of the categories, the ability to compare categories, and the capacity to construct significant causal relations of social behavior that go beyond the particular case we are describing. At the same time, if, as I have just tried to show, the abstract concepts themselves are not only historically or culturally grounded but an active part of concrete political projects, then there is an additional—often hidden—specificity curtailing our “scientific” perspective.

Often, the way we deal with these issues is by ignoring them and continuing to use the concepts as if they could still be the vehicles of comparison. For instance, I describe a specific way in which kinship relations, inheritance systems, farm labor, and a history of agrarian cooperatives in southern Catalonia or southern Valencia “work” to produce particular informal social relations of production in the decentralized garment or footwear manufacturing industry (Narotzky 2001*b*) and describe it all as *just* “reciprocity” or “embeddedness” with qualifications. This enables me to compare these situations with others in other places and other times, speaking to the “body of knowledge” that my colleagues—past and present—have accumulated. But can we assume, as we often do, that *this* reciprocity, *this or that* embeddedness or social capital, refer to similar social phenomena? Can we infer that they describe comparable existing social relationships? Can we use the information thus produced by our colleagues to *compare* and then *explain* how and why specific social relationships structure some “reality” that we vaguely refer to as “informal” forms of production?

The concepts we use produce a particularly tainted rep-

resentation of the reality that we try to capture with our ethnographic work (Smith 1991). We get to the facts, to the social relationships, in a different way if we think in terms of neoliberal embeddedness or Putnam's social capital or in terms of Maussian reciprocity. The way we select and describe will produce a different "reality." The questions that become central, then, are (1) how to produce a body of ethnographic information that is relevant for the scientific community, that is, what concepts to use or produce to capture the tension between specificity and abstraction while retaining categorical relevance for comparative purposes, (2) how to read ethnographic descriptions in such a way that the tension between specificities (local, political) and necessary abstraction becomes an asset for comparative purposes instead of a hindrance, and (3) how to deal with the political projects inherent in the concepts and models we use.

Conclusion

In the face of these questions I propose a *modus operandi* that I will tentatively term a "reflexive historical realism" (Smith 1999). It is based on several premises: (1) the need to historicize the concepts used to refer to "similar" phenomena in the ethnographic (or social sciences) literature, (2) the need to clarify personal political projects (that is, so to speak, self-historicization), (3) the need to treat concepts and models as part of the reality to be explained, (4) the belief that social transformation is not totally arbitrary or a mere construction of the willful intellectual reading of the text of symbolic social interaction (that is, that significant causal relations can be found for social phenomena that do not hinge on interpretation), and (5) the belief that there is a reality, beyond symbolic structuring, which produces "surprise" and "shock" in our models and, often, is the force that impels their transformation (Koselleck 2001).

In the end, both realism and the production of abstract concepts and models that emerge from it but transcend the specific awkwardness of the real seem to be the key to comparability. At the same time, rendering the unique comparable in some measure is the main condition of possibility of a "science"—meaning the collective attempt to arrive at explicative propositions about observable phenomena. But ethnographic realism, the instrument of our social science, is rightly discredited by the hidden politics it has brought to the field (Fabian 1983). Maybe the only way out of this dilemma is to dive deep into its implications and permanently expose the many political threads that are bound to be inherent in our ethnographic work.

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Comments

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Narotzky's paper is disappointing in five respects. First, how does "reflexive ethnographic realism" compare with other realist approaches in social and the human sciences? There are other contemporary versions of critical realism, notably that of Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer. It seems to me critical that Narotzky distinguish her brand from theirs, among others, or use the work of a variety of realists and their paradigms to support her case. Clearly the Marxist problematic is invoked here, but it too is neither critiqued nor used to support her proposal. Contemporary American pragmatist philosophy from William James to Hilary Putnam has found a way to discuss the object world while subjecting concepts to a continual epistemological, language-based critique. These traditions (and there are others) could have been and perhaps should have been invoked, if only to provide the reader with a signpost or two suggesting what Narotzky intends.

Second, her call for reflexive realism once more raises questions of theoretical context for critique and/or support of her program. Reflexivity as a social scientific proposition is a historically strong and varied epistemological standpoint, from Weber on one hand to praxis Marxism on the other. The origins of the journal *Critique of Anthropology* are precisely those of praxis Marxists and "68ers" attempting to crack open a space between anthropological self-assurance and the actual as well as symbolic violence that anthropologists in virtual silence witnessed. Where does Narotzky's program fit in? Once more, it is important to settle these basic questions in presenting a new research program.

Third, it seems that some concepts are more suspect than others, with those connected to "neoliberalism" being the most untrustworthy. I find this odd. In principle, all concepts deserve careful inspection and specification. Neoclassical notions of an industrial district, Polanyan concepts of embeddedness, neoliberal concepts of market failure, and their cognates should all be subjected to close scrutiny. Once again, there is a strong tradition attacking the fact/value distinction that Narotzky trades on in noting the dependence of concepts on political projects. How far does she want to go? Are there statements about the world that, regardless of our political intentions, can be shown to be true? Reasonable? Possible?

Narotzky's umbrage at the work of Mark Granovetter in particular seems to me unwarranted. Granovetter disencum-

bered Polanyi's embeddedness from an idealist ontology and put it to use in creative ways. His rational-choice-ness aside, he has been a highly effective revisionist of sociological and economic givens, carrying out thoroughgoing attacks on abstract, universalizing network theory and on the easy assumption that modern economies are about macro-forces and big firms. He was one of the first to notice that small firms were much more key to Western economies than was acknowledged in modern political economy. As far as I know, he has not taken up Putnam's cause of social capital. I agree with Narotzky—I am hard put to come up with a concept as suspect as social capital—so I think it is useful to distinguish persons and concepts that are more useful than others.

Fourth, Narotzky notes that many of us have spent the better part of 25 years studying petty-commodity production for the world market in Europe. I have never taken smallness as a *differentia specifica*, and I am not clear where Narotzky stands on this important point. Our subjects (and they are keenly aware of it) work as a part of the international division of labor in which size is a factor, helpful and/or harmful, in their economic outcomes. I agree with Narotzky that there has been a certain celebratory takeover of these forms of economic activity by the liberals and conservatives who have produced the various versions of neoliberalist thinking. But scholars on the left—from communist revisionists in Europe and anticapitalist Marxists in North America to the no-global, production-for-use anarchists widely diffused among us now—have been no less romantic in their appraisal of the mixes of production, marketing, and self-provisioning that make up the instances that Narotzky (in Spain) and I (in Italy) have observed closely. These scholars are no less hostile (as perhaps is suggested by Narotzky's antibureaucratic predicate) than any good neoliberal seeking to eliminate state or supranational governance of economic activities.

Finally, given that all concepts are suspect, once they have been inspected and scrubbed the key thing is whether they help us to understand a given reality. In my experience, informants in ethnographic encounters in realities interesting to both Narotzky and me are very familiar with the use of concepts, neoliberal, neocommunist, and reformist, in an economic language saturated with neoliberal notions, whether for or against. Thus, I take it as incumbent upon us to understand current microeconomic reasoning even as we may criticize it.

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The production of an abstract concept requires a selection of certain aspects of reality, a selection which will inevitably be guided by our political and cognitive ends. In this paper Narotzky examines the usefulness, for comparison and gener-

alization, of concepts whose production has been thus determined when they are applied in contexts marked by entirely different elements. She illustrates her argument by tracing the history of and political projects behind the concepts of reciprocity, embeddedness, and social capital. While some of these concepts have already been scrutinized in similar ways (e.g., Wall, Ferrazzi, and Schryer 1998 on social capital), the merit of Narotzky's work lies in considering together three concepts that have become predominant in economic anthropology.

My main concern is the way she conceives of abstract concepts. She is interested in "the paradox represented by concepts . . . whose main descriptive and explicative force lies precisely in their absolute specificity—their social, cultural, and spatial situatedness." Concepts certainly need specific content to be useful, but it is not true that concepts are introduced "to stand for very specific sets of profoundly historicized and localized human interactions." Concepts, thus conceived, become proper names which can only be applied to specific phenomena (e.g., kula ring, potlatch, etc.). The fruitfulness of any scientific concept, regardless of its origin, is tested by its potential to be applied to new realities. A concept is a tool for understanding particular phenomena, but it cannot be reduced to any of them (see Menzies 1977; Webb 1995). To paraphrase Kant, concepts without data are empty, but data without concepts are blind.

Secondly, Narotzky's argument about the specific political agendas of concepts could be applied to other disciplines besides anthropology. Surely *all* social sciences have to deal with similar issues. There are no neutral ways of approaching the human subject (Putnam 2002). Further, as feminist researchers, especially, have shown, even the apparently "objective" sciences of biology and medicine are tainted with concepts born of and grounded in specific political agendas. No concept, no word, for that matter, is ever free of specific "baggage," and its meaning will change over time and space. One just has to think of the changes the concept of "race" has undergone. While standard in English-speaking academia, it remains an *Unwort* (no-word, i.e., unspeakable) in German. But this characteristic of concepts should not be taken too far. Narotzky is right in arguing, against the "hermeneutical" turn, that "there is a reality beyond symbolic structuring." Enforcement of certain standards of scientific inquiry is required to ensure that our inherently "fuzzy" discipline does not turn into a literary club. This is not to say that we should all stick to the questionnaire-statistic-percentage tradition of social inquiry. But there can be no question that one of the fundamental conditions of our work is the clarification of the concepts we use in analysis and an awareness of their pedigrees and implications.

Thirdly, I have doubts about the effectiveness of the second point in Narotzky's *modus operandi*: "the need to clarify personal political projects." I fear a flood of ego-centered self-portrayals which put the author on a bigger stage than the object of inquiry. Besides, are we as anthropologists such co-

herent individuals that we can easily pin down our political projects like national flags on a map? I trust the anthropological community to read my political projects easily enough.

Finally, besides the political projects of which concepts are born and to which they point, there is a tendency toward fashions and fads in anthropology as well as in other disciplines. Maybe this comes with the necessity to “sell” our research (i.e., as a consequence of the way academic research is funded). Once a concept or theory has gained attention, “jumping on the bandwagon” may appear a better idea in the competition for scarce resources than coming up with a wordy description of a locally specific reality which speaks to no one but the specialist. It is the careless application of concepts to a wide range of phenomena and observations that waters them down and robs them of explanatory value and/or precision. Thus, Narotzky’s plea for caution in the use of concepts such as reciprocity, embeddedness, and social capital can be seen as a call to avoid what Francis Bacon called *idola fori*, words that gradually become meaningless because of their repeated use and abuse.

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I am totally sympathetic with Narotzky’s discomfort about certain abstract concepts’ having become unproblematic heuristic terms. Instead of describing certain aspects of reality—a *model of reality*, as Geertz would put it—these intellectual tools appear to be some kind of a *model for reality* and tools of social engineering. In this sense the content of the article seems pretty much in tune with the main points discussed by Smith (2006). Smith’s article suggests that the current European mechanisms of capitalist governance present academic anthropologists (and social scientists in general) with serious questions about how such mechanisms can be unveiled. The risk is that their research work on trust, cooperation, etc., often appears to legitimize the political agendas that promote productivist corporatism in governing the development of regional economies. By contrast, Narotzky argues that the very concepts which are increasingly used as an explanation for successful development in Europe reflect the political projects of the social scientists who introduced them. Scholars seem to be oblivious to the political loading of these concepts in applying them to concrete ethnographic descriptions. Her argument has prompted me to look at these concepts with a renewed awareness.

I agree with Narotzky’s proposed *modus operandi*, which she terms “reflexive historical realism.” Her programmatic suggestion may eventually constitute the means to achieve a more penetrating radical critique of the current capitalist economy. In this way anthropological research should be able to make a major contribution to the analysis of the impact

of neoliberal economic restructuring—too often more conveniently termed “global economic processes” to disguise its political and ideological content.

Anthropologists’ (and sociologists’) ongoing fascination with—and at times uncritical use of—terms such as “reciprocity,” “embeddedness,” and “social capital” stems from their discomfort with the hegemony of neoclassical economics rooted in neoliberal ideology. The postulates of that ideology are widely known: that the functioning of complex societies requires autonomous markets; that markets are powerful determinants of social institutions and cultural values; that non-economic factors, however interesting, are not explanatory; that individual behaviour must be at the centre of any economic analysis and understood by means of ahistorical rational-choice models (Zelizer 1988, 617). Anyone attempting to carry out ethnographic studies of informal economies, regional economies, or industrial districts is fully aware that these postulates make neoclassical economics “science fiction” (I borrow this expression from John Davis [1992]). The irony is that in trying to reveal the mechanisms of these socioeconomic systems and to demonstrate that the individuals, far from being atomized, are enmeshed in different social, cultural, and cognitive contexts, scholars resort to concepts that have produced a reified representation of social relations in the economy, an opposing fictional model.

Most of the sociological literature on Italian industrial districts is a case in point. For several years a recurrent imagery of social relations was invoked to describe industrial districts as the “‘ideal-typical’ regional economy”: a model of democratic cooperation and civic-mindedness, permeated by a profound work ethic. To capture this “reality,” “reciprocity,” “trust,” “embeddedness,” and “social capital” have been widely used; several scholars seem to be perfectly at ease in using them in a functionalist fashion. Yet, it was an arbitrary and selective reality; other, less appealing features were systematically disregarded. Some scholars have described regional economies as a battleground for fierce competitiveness, an arena of unequal power relations and gender and generational exploitation; few have focused on the ideological mechanisms that have allowed the reproduction of these specific social relations. These features too contributed to the economic growth of the industrial districts and might have been described in terms of the same concepts that had contributed to the portrayal of a much more captivating reality (Smith 1999, 186; Ghezzi 2005; Ghezzi and Mingione 2003). They needed to be described and explained rather than taken for granted as a distinctive component of the formation of a regional economy.

Thus, to me the question was not which concepts I should use but rather how I could use them to produce ethnographic material that did not endorse the political project that they subsumed. During my fieldwork on small family enterprises in the Brianza, for example, I started noticing elements that diverged from the self-promoting discourse of the region but were part of an inner dynamic of reciprocity. Alongside cases

of mutual solidarity that would fit into the original Maussian concept, I reported on other manifestations of reciprocity: a manipulable set of practices for obtaining the completion of a work order before other client firms, the reciprocity of revenge inflicted upon “lazy” workers, the elusive forms of favouritism in giving access to credit, etc. In infringing upon the original political project which lay behind the concept of reciprocity, I think I have conveyed a more complex reality.

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Narotzky’s advocacy of reflexive ethnographic realism is refreshingly anchored in auto-critique of her own classical anthropological wrapping-up of the results of her research on regional economies in Southern Europe as well as adding usefully to critiques of the apparent advance represented by social-capital models. By critiquing the abstract character of “reciprocity” and “embeddedness,” returned to fashion in critiques of “first-wave” neoliberalism, she shows that “embeddedness” may simply echo what Ben Fine argues is social-capital theory’s bottom line, a new attempt by microeconomic rational-choice theory to colonize the entire domain of the social sciences. This is a powerful demonstration of the foundational limitations of Occidental social science as an attempt to determine the significance of the world-historical transformations entrained by the rise of industrial capitalism and modern forms of urbanization and of the use of cross-cultural comparison to imagine more humane alternatives within an Occidentalized future. By linking the initial historical steps in the formulation of the concepts of reciprocity and embeddedness to a series of “third-way” postures between classical Liberalism and Bolshevism, she clarifies why these concepts managed to take off and have remained resilient to quite powerful critiques from a variety of positions. The political projects of some of the main protagonists of these concepts did, of course, differ from each other and from other kinds of third-way formulations (such as organicist states, populisms, and fascisms) that have been influential at certain times and in certain places. The ambiguity and vagueness of these abstractions helped maintain their credibility in deployment by otherwise distinct political projects and movements, as Narotzky shows in discussing how social capital has framed a variety of political projects in more recent times, with a tendency for the radical possibilities to be supplanted by neoliberal corporatism and social engineering designed to advance the deepening of market society. The resilience of neoliberal rule systems (which present ever greater historically configured and improvisational adaptive variety in concrete instances) lies in their ability to co-opt, incorporate, and subvert all manner of progressive projects as well as disguise

conservative communitarian utopias, especially in the United States.

I concur with her insistence that other kinds of abstractions remain necessary to promote a “scientific” framework for meaningful comparison and explanation. Yet she is diffident about what this entails. The abstractions whose vapidness and political malleability her paper critiques are the products of attempts to produce universals through the negation of models that failed (not surprisingly) to grasp the longer-term course of historical movement of capitalist social formations on a global scale, making parts of what existed and is still evolving anomalous. This much is clear from the tenacity of the much deconstructed notion of an “informal economy,” today ever more common in the former “centers” as well as “peripheries,” and the recurrence of normalizing endeavours on the part of would-be social engineers faced with a world in which solutions always seem to provoke new problems. Have we really succeeded in breaking the ideological spell of the historical emergence of “the economic”? Bourdieu’s view of social capital is clearly different from those of Coleman and Putnam, but not only does it fail to escape that framework of enchantment (and its romantic negation, when his thoughts turn to North African peasants) but it rests on an attempted mediation of the claims of subjectivism and objectivism that helped keep the field open for the rational-actor perspective. Furthermore, at one level of abstraction, Granovetter (who also critiques “undersocialized” approaches) does score powerful points against some of the oversocialized approaches that he criticizes, such as some brands of “moral-economy” thinking, and “reciprocity” endlessly invites deromanticization. Identifying hidden political agendas does not solve the theoretical problem of achieving better diagnoses of the concrete possibilities of the realization of alternative, more humane visions in a world whose organization no longer corresponds to nineteenth- or twentieth-century imaginaries, including that of Marx and socialist modernizers. The clear prescriptions for political action in that world of figures such as Polanyi and Mauss also seem distant from most anthropological positions today (though activist scholars such as Keith Hart and David Graeber have redirected attention to Mauss’s political writings). Situated anthropological research might follow a Gramscian path towards fully historicizing the production of local societies and “culture,” but this could be a step towards a broader comparative rethinking of these basic issues that would also represent a re-engagement with normative debate about the enhancement of human welfare, using what we know about what is to rethink and promote what might still be. Anthropological knowledge may be restricted to the less utopian goal of making the schemes of the powerful more helpful for people and the preservation of an ever more fragile sociality, but a different kind of social engagement remains an option.

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Narotzky makes an intriguing addition to the lengthy debates about the production of ethnographic knowledge. She suggests that despite years of reflexive and critical doubts about the existence of “realities” beyond particular ways of understanding them (i.e., the now familiar argument that, in line with everyone else, anthropologists generate the realities they purport to describe), ethnographers nevertheless persist in implying or asserting that such (meta- or ontological) realities exist. The interesting twist is that she suggests that this occurs through selective forgetting—many anthropologists discount (forget) the way the concepts they use (e.g., reciprocity or social capital) to explore their ethnographic data were developed with particular political projects in mind while at the same time suggesting that there can be no realities beyond the ones constructed by the ethnographer. In other words, by treating concepts as if they were abstractions (abstracted from the historical and political context that generated them in order to use them both to describe and to compare the particular ethnographic material at hand), there is an axiomatic separation between the “ethnographic reality” being described and the conceptual framework used to describe it which is rarely explicitly acknowledged.

Narotzky’s proposed solution to this problem, which she calls “reflexive historical realism,” is initially startling: there is, she suggests, a reality beyond our constructions of them, one that can surprise or shock ethnographers out of their previous assumptions. By recognizing this, anthropologists are in a position to acknowledge their own political projects and motivations, as well as the political histories of the concepts they use. In short, there is an elephant in the room: despite years of debate, many anthropologists are still relying on an assertion of a separate, empirical reality that validates their work, and, ignoring both this fact and the political character of the concepts that they use as abstractions, they are maintaining an unacknowledged empiricism through the back door. It is time, Narotzky suggests, to acknowledge the existence of that reality so as to be in a better position to assess the political history of the concepts used in ethnography and to be more open about the political motivations and projects of ethnographers in describing their ethnography in particular ways.

Although this issue has been aired many times and in many different ways (perhaps especially in feminist-inspired critical assessments of the production of knowledge and in Foucauldian debates), it is well worth airing again. Indeed, anthropology probably relies on making this debate a perpetual one, for a key aspect of the discipline concerns the exploration of how diverse realities are generated, maintained, and de-

scribed and how they may be compared with one another; and since the development of the critical reflexivity to which Narotzky refers this exploration cannot avoid including the production of anthropological knowledge. The question that remains for me is what kind of elephant is in the room. Most anthropologists will have experienced the shock that Narotzky describes, one that rattles a few preconceived assumptions or ideas about how to understand what is happening.

The question is how to describe it: as the demonstration of the existence of a reality that is separate from those constructed by the ethnographer, as Narotzky suggests? Or, perhaps, as an indication of the simultaneous existence of several different and sometimes mutually contradictory or even competing *conceptions* of reality, all with their political histories, projects, and motivations? What makes concepts such as reciprocity and social capital obviously part of a political project, it seems to me, is that their authors asserted that the realities they were describing could be, and often were, otherwise—that there were competing conceptions and abstractions that had less moral worth than the ones being proposed. I agree entirely with Narotzky’s recommendation that anthropologists be aware of the political histories of their concepts and not treat them as pure abstractions; my suggestion is that it might be worth exploring the way diverse and sometimes mutually contradictory concepts, including the concepts used by anthropologists, become entangled in the generation of separate realities.

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When I read their *Immediate Struggles* (Narotzky and Smith 2006), the book that forms the background for Smith’s (2006) and Narotzky’s discussions in this journal, I thought, “This must be as good as it gets.” Here is an excellent historical ethnography showing how essential the historical realist approach—as nurtured in a broadly envisioned cultural political economy tradition in anthropology—is for understanding the logics of contemporary local social change. But its sheer quality does distract from a regrettable omission. The book reiterates a set of by-now-established positions “against culture” and “beyond just the natives’ point of view” but comes to a standstill at the point at which it could begin to make a contribution to the urgent rethinking of local ethnography in the context of neoliberal globalization (or European corporatist varieties of it). This is the more surprising in that one of its crucial moments of discovery is an invitation to such an innovation. The researchers were surprised that expert informants interviewed in the 1980s had by the late 1990s rephrased their insights into regional problems in terms of discourses deeply influenced by EU corporatist concepts of

regional economies and social capital. They also discovered that by losing these organic intellectuals to an emergent stratum of local policy-researchers writing grants for EU competitions, local public actors lost the confidence and ability to speak in a language of social rights and increasingly focused on issues of entrepreneurialism, competitiveness, and “becoming European.” This destroyed the bases for local mobilizations, articulate dialogue, and a critical public sphere. In short, Narotzky and Smith identified a local version of the downward spiral of public alternatives in Europe (and elsewhere), but its discovery remained largely incidental to the method of local historical realism they advocated because the engine of the process as well as its framing originated not in the locale itself but on a translocal level.

Narotzky and Smith make good on this with their two CA articles. Narotzky advocates reflexivity à la Bourdieu: scientific concepts harbor the politics of the social sciences, and we must therefore be aware of the political projects wrapped up in them. She offers excellent discussions of reciprocity, embeddedness, and social capital from which we can all learn and shows how all three have been tuned or retuned for contemporary conservative use.

These are all very welcome exercises that add to the recent realist turn in anthropology (see, e.g., Gingrich and Fox 2002; Kalb and Tak 2005), but while such reflexivity is clearly necessary it is not sufficient. Grappling with similar problems, I have recently proposed two notions that can help us keep going exactly at the point where reflexivity leaves off: “concrete abstractions” and “critical junctions.” Abstract policy concepts (often taken from the social sciences) such as social capital become vehicles for material social change as they circulate in policy fields and become entangled with the politics of territorialized/local actors. They become concrete abstractions (with a nod to Marx). But what exactly they do or help do is not yet entirely scripted (*pace* reflexivity). That ultimately depends on who appropriates them for what purposes in what contexts. The process can usefully be described with the notion of critical junctions—identifiable and non-random sets of linkages between local actors and arenas and translocal fields of power (with a nod to Eric Wolf). Concrete abstractions and critical junctions are quintessential anthropological objects.

If we succeed in determining the precise nature of such critical junctions, we should be able to do more than merely “describe it all as *just* ‘reciprocity’ or ‘embeddedness’ with qualifications.” The latter is an impotent strategy for generalization and abstraction. It leads to ritual confirmation of the abstractions (with qualifications) rather than articulating the vectors such *concrete* abstractions help shape in local realist process, which should be the object of discovery of ethnography. The emphasis must be on the specificity of that process, in terms of the critical junctions that move it, and show the real-life properties that abstract policy notions acquire within specific trajectories of territorialized social change. In earlier

work, for example, I have developed the concept of flexible familism to systematize the properties of a specific and counterintuitive path of modern industrialization in the South of the Netherlands. As we should expect, such idiosyncratic paths must depend on a form of embeddedness in prior and specific local social relationships and histories, but instead of restating the obvious I emphasized the surprising specificity and peculiarity of such arrangements by giving them a name of their own and thus setting them up for systematic comparison and elaboration. This is what, in an important commentary on Eric Wolf’s methodology, has been called “articulating hidden histories” (Schneider and Rapp 1995).

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Narotzky’s article makes a compelling contribution to the study of the politics of anthropological knowledge production. Its methodological innovation centers upon addressing the often obfuscated connections between multiple locations of the political, particularly those real-world projects that occupy the minds and worlds of anthropologists at various stages of their research and inhere in the concepts they produce from it. It is this approach that allows Narotzky to ask such poignant questions about what she calls the more “scientific” aspirations of our discipline: how concepts abstracted from one set of social relations might effectively be translated to another, how ethnographic work might resolve its tensions between representation and reflexivity, and so on. Although readers are directed to other sources for the rich ethnographic details that inform Narotzky’s queries, we are given enough of the story here to see why they so urgently matter to her. The key anthropological concepts—reciprocity, embeddedness, and social capital—that politicians, analysts, and local people are currently using to explain and push forward a particular form of neoliberal capitalism in Spain were, in fact, developed under different historical circumstances specifically to critique and subvert the effects of such an unrestricted form of capitalist development in various parts of Europe. While the very situated character of this problem may make work on this region an oft-referenced case study of critical ethnographic knowledge, it also seems to prompt a turning of Narotzky’s central question back upon itself: what are we to do with the project in her model for anthropological research if we hope to translate it from her ethnographic context to our own? Here I touch on only two of the many leads she has given us to work with.

The first concerns the ontological status of the “abstraction”—what we take its relationship to tangible and observable social reality to be and the work we expect it to perform in explaining or expressing that reality. To Narotzky, the main

problem with abstractions seems to be that they survive beyond the social contexts they were meant to explain and, when transplanted into other social realities, make them instantly “knowable” apart from inquiry into the existing social relations, which may turn out to be quite distinct from those which gave birth to the concepts. To Marx the problem seemed to be in some ways exactly the reverse: abstractions were “abstract” not only because they obscured the social relations behind them and achieved a false veneer of objectivity but because they mystified the deeper systemic “logics” (surplus transfer, class struggle, value, etc.) that *connected* social forms to one another in and across distinct social formations and gave rise to similar units of abstraction in disparate locations. The sense that the most important thing that lay behind such units was a localized particularity (and not, say, a logic of social reproduction or what Narotzky calls “significant causal relations . . . for social phenomena that do not hinge on interpretation”), as if they were organically part of this or that “real” world, seemed part of their mystifying power of objectivity itself. While expecting a concept like “reciprocity” to have anything more than heuristic value may seem bad ethnography, it may help us to further de-fetishize the “locality” and uncover shared tensions among people dealing with conflicts that are already instrumentally connected across time and space, such as those pertaining to the advance of wage labor relations and dispossession. I mean this only to reinforce my enthusiasm for the questions that Narotzky asks about the politics of scholarship, which seem to advocate an emphasis on connections, by bringing them to bear more directly on those she asks of our concepts, which seem to advocate the reverse.

A second, related issue concerns Narotzky’s support of a (re)turn to a form of “realism” as an answer to the excesses of hyper-relativist social inquiry. This is a direction which I endorse but which warrants clarification about what a position rooted in “realism”—a concept whose own complicated and very political genealogy somehow escapes comment here—might mean today. By my reading, Narotzky has in fact given anthropology a much more complex and interesting challenge. In her call to work out how abstractions become part of the *productive* fabric of social reality, her attention to the way our models are woven into both local vernaculars and effective policy, and her leaning on Bourdieu’s notions of subjectivities continuously wrapped in “mutual” and “objectifying objectifications,” she has exposed the very messy and politically charged constitution of “the real” that we face in the field (and the objectivist mystique that envelops it) in ways that avoid facile constructivism but seem only awkwardly pressed into service of a retreat to “realism” (which are of course not our options). Read attentively, this sophisticated article should inspire much critical ethnographic work in years to come.

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Narotzky’s program of “reflexive ethnographic realism” represents an important and refreshing step in the direction of analytical responsibility. Although I have concerns about how she would implement this project and about the examples she uses to illustrate it, it is a program for anthropologists who take their intellectual and political responsibilities seriously. At the same time, however, I am concerned that it is bound to be misunderstood by those who are simply antagonistic to a theoretically sophisticated realism.

Her claim that causal relations exist in social life “that do not hinge on interpretation” is almost certain to be misunderstood, partly because she has not expressed it clearly and partly because of naive views held to by antirealists of the epistemology of the social sciences and its relationship to language. Specifically, along with critics of the realism she espouses, she fails to address issues of multiple levels of referentiality in language that define not only a social relation but also its description. Antirealists (social constructivist or other) argue that all social science descriptions and analyses are discursive constructions and thus interpretations (“representations”) and ask how we can imagine writing about a world we do not understand or know about when it is filled with language and Geertzian “webs of meaning” and interpretations and our own analyses are all interpretations themselves—“turtles all the way down,” in Geertz’s (1973) terms. However, this view is philosophically inconsistent and naive and ultimately generates a radical skepticism that is incompatible with ethnographic analysis itself.

Of course, language is central to social life, social relations are organically connected to the interpretations that people make in the course of their interactions, and people make interpretations about interpretations about social life. But—and this is a crucial element of Narotzky’s reflexive realism—concepts and models themselves need to be explained, though at different levels of referentiality from the one they purport to conceive, interpret, or explain, and usually such meta-referentiality occurs at more than one level. A rigorous explanation of a concept (or, more appropriately, of a theory or of a narrative) that at one level analyzes an interpretation as an ideology, for instance, need not itself be an interpretation of the same status as that which it seeks to explain. It can seek to explain, in accordance with criteria set by ethnographic and related (e.g., linguistic) methods checked by empirical evaluation, how the concept, narrative, etc., functions within, frames, or constrains the episodes of social life we seek to understand.

Ideally, one explanation is subject to refutation by another explanation that better accounts for the discursive and non-

discursive realities being examined in terms of accuracy, scope, cohesiveness, parsimony, etc. Critiques of this kind abound within anthropology (see, e.g., Asad's [1972] critique of Barth's [1965] conception of Swat Pathan politics). Although both an ideology and an explanation of it are discursive, their anointment as "discourse" and thus somehow equivalent is empty formalism.

Narotzky's call for reflexive ethnographic realism suggests what should be obvious to ethnographers—that ethnographic claims are subject to empirical assessment, if not "confirmation" or "validation" as in the physical sciences. Certainly they are subject to debate and, through it, acceptance, amendment, or rebuttal. As Narotzky puts it, there is a "reality" beyond "symbolic structuring" (i.e., interpretation at a high level of referentiality) that leads to "surprises" and "shocks" in our models.

And that leads to a second challenge to the antirealist response: social life is much more than *just* discourse. It consists of domains of interconnected behaviors, language genres, and embodied semiotics that are not easily captured by verbose and literalist "discourse analysis" (see Nonini 1998, 1999). This is something that even Foucault conceded as his previously nihilistic approach to human agency came up squarely against his incipient gay activism (Paras 2006).

This can mean, among other things, that our informants often have sophisticated interpretations of the role of language (e.g., in jokes, use of irony, and the metaphors of oratory), embodied semiotics, and the behaviors connected to a domain of power (e.g., the workplace) and to relations of asymmetrical power (see, e.g., Nonini 1998). As Gramsci (1971) put it, every person is a philosopher, to which I would add, a social analyst as well. This is an aspect of social life that discursive determinists ignore or miss entirely.

If it were not so tragic that discursive determinists ignore such social-linguistic dynamics and the politics they imply with their overly literal deployment of the formula "discourse" = "knowledge" = "power," it would be farcical. As it is, a generation of graduate students in anthropology, at least in the United States, has had to digest this pabulum as the key to ethnographic knowledge, to everyone's loss. Narotzky's program of reflexive ethnographic realism provides at least a partial cure for recovering poststructuralists.

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Given the prominence of social capital in contemporary policy circles, Narotzky's article is extremely timely and significant. She brings us back from discussions about the utility of social capital in policy interventions and development strategies and forces us to consider fundamental questions about the relationship between abstract concepts that rely on situated spec-

ificities for their efficacious operation on the ground. How can we overcome the tension between abstraction and specificity without either distorting the specific or losing the capacity to provide broader "descriptive and explicative force"? Her answers lie in historicizing the concepts and bringing to the fore the political projects that help to explain how the specific became generalized in the work of scholars such as Mauss and Polanyi and was later transformed by the very different projects of adapters such as Granovetter and Putnam.

One of the key questions that Narotzky asks is about the value of an "abstract universal concept whose main substantive asset is precisely the centrality of *specific* social relations that make profitable economic organization possible." While this is indeed an important issue, she neglects some relevant history herself: an influential debate between Paul Bohannon (1969) and Max Gluckman (1969) in which a comparable issue was addressed at some depth. Bohannon was very critical of what was a common practice in the anthropology of law: forcing non-Western cultural categories into the conceptual compartments of Western jurisprudence. He argued that doing this was inappropriate, ethnocentric, and likely to lead to misunderstandings and confusions and insisted that appropriate practice was to avoid translation and conduct the examination using emic or folk terms only. Gluckman and other scholars such as Leopold Pospisil (1983) and Sally Falk Moore (1978) argued that, in principle, it should be possible to refine English terms and to add folk terms where necessary to facilitate comparison. There is clearly a danger of falling into ethnocentric assumptions when we do this, but the existence of the risk does not mean that it is inevitable. Engaging in comparison while using distorting, ethnocentric baggage will always be difficult, but it is not impossible. The problem is that it seems impossible to engage in effective comparison while remaining within particular emic vocabularies, since they may organize things in totally different ways. In other words, we do seem to need an analytic, comparative model. In the frame of Narotzky's essay, we need reciprocity as well as *guanxi*, *blat*, or *hau*. It would be useful for her to build on some of the conclusions of these discussions.

There is a burgeoning academic and popular literature on *guanxi*, which can be translated literally as "social connections." The discussions on this have recently been going in the opposite direction from Narotzky's concerns: scholars have been asking why it is necessary to exoticize interpersonal relations by placing them in the frame of *guanxi* when so much of the behavior seems to be explainable in terms of broader ideas of networking or social capital (Gold et al. 2002; Wellman et al. 2002). By remaining within the emic terms, it is suggested, the uniqueness of Chinese exchange practices is exaggerated and the potential for useful comparisons lost. Narotzky's expression of the dilemma between abstraction and specificity makes very clear the broader theoretical stakes in these deliberations.

What of the (hidden) political projects that she argues must

be brought to the surface if the dilemma is to be resolved? In the case of *guanxi*, it is not its relationship to networking that has the deepest political ramifications but its relationship to corruption and “crony capitalism.” Social capital has been carefully massaged by Putnam and others to avoid the clear (but occluded) overlap with nepotism and corruption, sometimes by theoretical obfuscations such as “negative social capital.” But what of those of us whose engagement with scholarship is not driven by any apparent political project? Does engaging in anthropology for anthropology’s sake rather than for political purposes mean that, paradoxically, we cannot overcome the dilemma that Narotzky lays out? Perhaps we need to update the psychoanalytical assessment that American anthropologists were once encouraged to undertake prior to fieldwork with political psychoanalysis?

Reply

I am grateful for the comments of all my colleagues because they have helped me clarify what they call my “program.” Most of the comments deal with three issues that I will try to make clearer: the tension between specificity and abstraction, reflexivity, and realism.

On specificity and abstraction. First, I should make clear that the issues I raise about the concepts of “reciprocity,” “embeddedness,” and “social capital” may not concern all concepts generally. The concepts I deal with seem to be particular in that their abstraction is predicated on the empirical observation that they are supported by historically localized institutions and culturally embedded social relations producing specific realms of responsibility (Searle’s [2006] “deontic power”). What makes these particular concepts interesting for my discussion is this:

1. What produces their “abstract” quality is precisely their concrete situatedness—that is, if there is something to the concept of social capital or reciprocity or embeddedness as a methodological tool and also as a policy instrument, it is that it defines the vague contours of social relations whose force lies in their specificity in each context.

2. They come into being, it seems to me, as the work of “organic intellectuals” at the turn of the twentieth century through the conversion of specific ethnographic data into general abstract categories that can be universally applicable. The explicit political project builds on their Third Way alternative potentialities to structure a different world order and seems to be able to point to a different possible reality through producing new categories and connections between interacting subjects and institutions that may provide the grounds for new forms of political action and change.

3. These same concepts are used today in two rather different ways—as a gloss for describing in ethnographic observation any personalized type of relation that may sustain

material transfers, therefore producing an ahistorical account of structure and process, and as concrete abstractions or categories (as used by experts, policy makers, funding agencies, local power holders, and anthropological subjects in general) that reproduce some of the structural conditions for present-day capital accumulation. Far from wanting to fetishize the locality (Krupa) or stress the incommensurability of emic concepts (Smart), I want to suggest that the structural value of these concepts is simultaneously that they rest on the force of specificity *and* that they gloss over it and dehistoricize the actual social processes that produce it. Thus *guanxi*, *blat*, and Western-style networking are the same *type* of abstract concept—social capital—because they are *not* sustained by the same historically grounded personalized type of relations. It is from this paradoxical categorical position that they get to be central tenets of the present-day reproduction of capital accumulation, one which is producing social objects of a corporatist type and connecting them through the media and the market in what seems to me a new structure of the connection of regulation and exploitation, articulated at different space scales, that is producing new conflicts and cultural-identity- and locality-grounded modalities of consciousness (Narotzky 2006). These abstract concepts, then, do create an objectivist mystique that envelops the real (Krupa) as a consequence of their not being considered in their historical genesis (both in the field of scholarship and in the field of the political agency of intellectuals in particular conjunctures) and in their various political matrices (both originally and in the present).

The tension between specificity and abstraction may easily drift into some form of epistemological relativism or, conversely, to theoretical closure. I wish, however, to maintain the tension in the methodological polarity between ethnography and comparison. The issue at play, then, is how we should proceed if what we produce is to be meaningful for the work of others. This raises several questions: the problem of the description of localized realities, the problem of comparison and the selection of the relevant characteristics of a concept, and the problem of the logic we aim to produce through the connection of the abstract concepts. In my paper I try to show that there is no “pure” solution to this set of interlocked problems. But it seems to me that we should address them head-on in our work instead of looking the other way. This point leads me to the issue of reflexivity.

On reflexivity. There are many versions of reflexivity in anthropology. As I have argued, I myself prefer Bourdieu’s (2003b) because it eschews the solipsist drive (ego anthropology) of other, more post-structuralist forms. What seems interesting to me is not so much that science and its practitioners are situated in particular social fields as that this fact shapes social interaction and institutional structuring. As Hacking (2003, esp. chaps. 1, 4, and 5) would put it, it is the “looping effect” of our concepts and theoretical constructions on “real life” (as Marx uses the term in his *Feuerbach Theses*) that I want to explore. The reason for this is the awareness

that what we do has some, perhaps unintended and often concealed, consequences for the lives of many people (including ourselves). In trying to unveil “the project in the model” I want to show the multiple and complex aspects of the engagement of our work with the world. I have stressed the issue of politics because the type of conscious action on the world I want to explore is that geared to transforming the processes of regulation, the production of responsibility, and the economic processes.

What I found intriguing in the concepts used to make sense of the realities of informal economies was (1) their foundational explicit emergence as politically oriented concepts aimed at creating the possibilities of more humane realities, (2) their apparent depoliticization in present-day social science use, producing a logical void at their core, and (3) their effective application to a wide range of political projects in the present, ranging from neoliberal corporatist agendas (Putnam 1993) to emancipatory solidarist agendas that follow more in the path of the original Maussian project (such as those of the M.A.U.S.S group; see also Godbout 1992; Latouche 1998; Laville 2000) (Gledhill, Ghezzi, Kalb). Does this mean that because these concepts are entangled in multiple political agendas (which Blim calls “suspect,” a term I would not use myself) they do not “help us to understand a given reality” (Blim, Fleischer)? I think, on the contrary, that they can only help us understand that reality if we are able to historicize their production, situate them in the present-day discourses and practices of ordinary people, experts, policy makers, scholars, institutions, etc., defining the “critical junctions” that Kalb proposes, and make an effort to clarify our aims. It may be true for many of us (as Fleischer and Smart point out) that we are often not coherent about or even aware of our political projects. We may not even conceive them as something “political” (Smart). But I am talking about an ethical position here, a position of intellectual responsibility that requires the effort of becoming conscious of why we select or construct particular theoretical systems and decry others. I am not talking so much about an empathic engagement with the problems of people we meet in fieldwork that drives us to take sides, although that is part of the coeval challenge of the ethnographic encounter (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Fabian 1983). Rather, I am underlining foremost the need for *theoretical* engagement as the main responsibility of intellectuals in politics (Gledhill). Theory is our making of reality. This point leads me to the issue of realism.

On realism. It should be clear by now that I follow neither a form of empirical realism nor a form of epistemological relativism. It seems fairly obvious to most social scientists, I think, that scientific knowledge of human (and of natural) events is socially produced and that it emerges in fields of force that include academic interaction and economic and political interests and projects as well as more general commonsense notions of the world. This, however, does not imply taking an antirealist or relativist position. In the social sciences in general and in anthropology in particular, our objects of

knowledge (the problems, processes, institutions, etc., that we want to explain) are observer-relative and ontologically subjective but often also epistemically objective. In Searle’s words, “observer relativity implies ontological subjectivity but ontological subjectivity does not preclude epistemic objectivity. We can have epistemically objective knowledge about money and elections even though the kind of facts about which one has epistemologically objective knowledge are themselves ontologically subjective, at least to a degree which we need to specify” (2006, 15). This epistemic objectivity in the context of ontological subjectivity points to one of the possible aspects of realism that can be captured through ethnographic fieldwork (including not only direct observation of social interaction and discourse but the production of data such as these of statistics and the media, which will need to be critically assessed as we assess factual information from any other source). The realities we capture through our ethnographic experience are embedded in different structures of meaning, those of the anthropological subjects (both commonsense and expert and often heterogeneous) and those of the anthropologist (commonsense and expert as well) (Green). Therefore these realities are not devoid of a multiplex symbolic structuring expressed in interaction, observation, and representation, but they produce an epistemically objective aspect of social reality that, in my opinion, should be actively recuperated for anthropological research.

There is another aspect of reality which is crucial, and it is the theoretical one: reality as a logical construct of causal propositions, as providing the laws of motion that can explain social processes. These constructs (theories) of categories, concepts, and their logical connection are meant to make sense in a coherent and non-contingent way of observed correlations and regularities. Theories are also produced in a social field with many historically situated determinations allowing nevertheless for the play of contingency (Bourdieu 1980a, 2003b). The realism of theory (or of any similarly coherent set of causally connected propositions with an explanatory intent, whether folk or expert, in any cultural setting) rests on the will to produce some structural fixity that will enable purposeful action in the world: the need to stop the endless drift of life. The realism of theory is a central tenet of realism in the (natural) sciences’ philosophy of science (Bird 2003, 121–61). Here, however, I feel closer to Gramscian philosophy of praxis, pointing to the need for a philosophy, a history, selecting and connecting events and processes and constructing a logic that can make experience meaningful and orient action in a particular political project: the proposition that we need to produce a philosophy that structures present experience and creates the conditions of possibility for transforming reality (Gramsci 1987 [1929–35], 323–77). The role of organic intellectuals as different from that of traditional intellectuals in producing logical and meaningful connections that explain experience in such a way as to open up the possibility of change and collective mobilization is, in my

opinion, a relevant question for situating the knowledge we produce (Smith 2004).

But there is an additional aspect which should be taken into account in this discussion: the difference between realism and the Real. Reality (both aspects of it) is always dependent on structures of meaning produced in social interaction and materialized in concrete abstractions, including categories for thought (material objects and space but also funding programs, institutional policies, law, etc.); the real is the accident that shatters reality as a construct, both intellectual and material, that makes sense (Koselleck 2001). As Lacan (1978, 137; 2005, 76, 92–102) put it, the real is impossible because it remains undifferentiated outside of any symbolic structuration. The real here is not the epistemologically objective aspect of social reality (Searle 2006; Hacking 2003) or the potential of agency or contingency in social action, and it is not the resistance (of reality) and adaptation (of positivist models); it is the shocking realization that some events (historical, natural) do not make sense within the structure of reality in which we operate as social groups or individuals and require the production of an entirely new structure. Koselleck's (2001, 83) account of the creative force of defeat for the production of innovative theories of history is a good illustration of this: "If history is made in the short run by the victors, historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished."

In this sense, although I think that the views of "transcendental realism" (Bhaskar 1978, esp. chap. 3) the "morphogenetic" approach of structuring social systems over time (Archer 1982, 478), and the "looping effects" of kinds upon epistemological social objects (Hacking 2003) all can be related in some ways to my understanding of realism and the real, I must confess that my position stems not so much from an epistemological problematic as from a political one (although my point is to stress how much they are connected). My interest in ethnography stems from a desire to explain why people live the way they do—not of their own free choosing or because of the contingencies that befall any imaginable system but because structured logics of material constraint and historically produced cultures of responsibility create the conditions of possibility for subjective action and define the spaces and modalities of political mobilization.

Reflexive ethnographic realism, reflexive historical realism. The point I want to make is both very naïve and very complex. On the one hand, I think that anthropologists need to engage thoroughly in ethnographic research and produce realist descriptions of the experience. I concede that mine is, perhaps, an obsolete understanding of ethnography as direct long-term experience, observation, and analysis of real-life situations but one in which the subject-object distinction is a discontinuous categorization of multiplex social relations developing in everyday life situations and harboring different levels of referentiality many of which, as Nonini suggests, are not usefully glossed by the discursive metaphor. As I have stated, a reflexive stance should be built into our observation and descriptive

practices, as it is obviously a component of our analytical capacities. On the other hand, I think that anthropologists need to engage thoroughly in theoretical construction. In my personal positioning (but this does not have to be other colleagues' option), theory in the social sciences is structurally historical, and history is a construction of logical connections. Here again, the reflexive stance rests on the awareness of the tension between specificity and abstraction inherent in concepts and the power of this tension and on the realist quality of theory. Beyond freedom and determination, theory spells the need to stop the flow of endless possible interpretation and produce some stable ground for action, a structure. But theoretical engagement cannot be effected *in absentia*, away from the realities we engaged with in the ethnographic experience and in the confrontation with the ethnographic material and theoretical productions of our colleagues, past and present.

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