Conceptions of Capitalism: Godelier and Keynes

In Values and Valuables: From the Sacred to the Symbolic (Society for Economic Anthropology Monograph Series #21), edited by Cynthia Werner and Duran Bell, Altamira Press, 2004.

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INTRODUCTION

In The Mental and the Material (1986) Maurice Godelier speaks of the “active presence of thought at the very heart of our material activities” (1986:18). Godelier has reworked the relationship between economy and culture: rather than thinking of culture and ideology as a system of meanings standing apart from everyday material practice, mystifying or justifying it, he sees them as implicated in material life in a much more fine-grained and active way. Culture is not the top layer of the cake (1986:128) but the leavening throughout it. Making things entails “setting to work mental realities, representations, judgments, principles of thought” (1986:10-11). Godelier (1999) privileges the imaginary over the symbolic, emphasizing the active ability to imagine, to use symbolic resources rather than being used by them.

However, the material activities associated with markets and capitalism appear culturally and socially barren in Godelier’s work. His examples of mental activities inside material processes are drawn from noncapitalism. Where capitalism is present, it stands apart from other social institutions like family and community (1986:138, 148-9) and threatens them (1999:2); the threat stems not from any alternative, incompatible, or unpleasant sociality that capitalist workplaces and markets represent, but rather their complete lack of sociality – their alienation, atomism, and anomie. When we work for capitalist firms, “one earns a living as a separate individual”
rather than as part of a community; when one buys and sells, one participates in a system of object circulation that is the polar opposite of gift giving, in that it fails to create long-term obligations (1999:43, 2002:15). Godelier (1999:43) endorses Gregory’s (1982) stark give|sell split, in which an act of selling leaves “each party…once more independent and free of obligations to others.”

It is easy to demonstrate the gap between this stark caricature and the observed material life of actual places and times that are commonly described by the terms “capitalist” and “market.” Actual markets are complex social institutions (Swedberg 1994), capitalist firms exhibit important internal sociality (Tilly and Tilly 1994), and the notion that capitalism can be understood separate from other social institutions, in particular from gender and race, has been challenged by decades of scholarship (e.g. Hartmann 1976, Hall 1980). It is harder to show that this gap matters; it might be argued that Godelier is mainly concerned with non-capitalist phenomena and that his remarks on capitalism and markets should be understood as simple heuristics or gestures of political and moral engagement.

My first argument is that the rhetorical framing that Godelier employs – a framing that opposes a culturally and socially sterile capitalism/commerce to other kinds of material life that are socially and culturally rich – does two kinds of damage. It undoes efforts to avoid modernist prejudgments of the historical and social world, and it reinforces the compartmentalization of social science. This argument is presented in the next section.

My second argument is for a transdisciplinary (Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin in press) approach to the material life of places that are designated “market” and “capitalist.” Here I
draw on Post Keynesian thought, one of several heterodox schools of economic analysis that may yet help us reintegrate the study of economy with other aspects of our social existence. Two points of theory are important: the Post Keynesian emphasis on the time structure of material life, which gives us a specific way of asking questions about the social embeddedness of economy; and the role of representations and ideas in the ways that large groups or classes of people interact. Here we will see that Godelier’s work brings out an important aspect of the thought of John Maynard Keynes.

**CAPITALISM AND MODERNITY**

Let us take a moment to situate Godelier’s work. Economic anthropology has long (a) identified distinct systems or logics by which objects circulate among people and (b) set those distinct systems in relation to one another. The dominant tradition has been to arrange these distinct systems according to a criterion of social density or closeness (Mirowski 1994, 2001, Danby 2002). For several major figures see Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most Densely Social</th>
<th>Least Densely Social</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malinowski</td>
<td>pure gifts</td>
<td>reciprocated gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauss</td>
<td>total services</td>
<td>gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahlins</td>
<td>generalized reciprocity</td>
<td>balanced reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(familial pooling)</td>
<td>(gifts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Godelier</td>
<td>keeping</td>
<td>giving</td>
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Beyond mere taxonomy, this schema has also functioned as a representation of a theory of
society. In this theory, patterns of circulation that generate or renew society are placed toward the left side of this continuum, while on the right side we encounter patterns of object circulation that are asocial or even socially corrosive. The core of sociality, in this conception, appears to reside in close kinship and particularly in lineages. But lineages exclude people, by definition. Gifts then play a mediating role between familial closeness on the one side and potentially hostile asociality on the other. By the giving of gifts the socially-bonding qualities attributed to close family groups are extended to make a larger society (Sahlins 1972, Gudeman 2001, Godelier this volume).

This framework becomes identifiably modernist when both space and time are mapped onto it, with the modern and West placed at the right side, and the primitive and nonwest on the left side. The result is a Gemeinschaft-to-Gesellschaft story in which close sociality, and the moral qualities attributed to it, first rises as gifting extends social bonds beyond close kin groups and then declines as markets, states, and other modern institutions arise. Space is mapped onto time when the “West” is regarded as close to the end of this history, while the non-West is closer to the beginning. This mapping, which is explicitly present in Sahlins 1972 and Mauss 1990 (Danby 2002), is, I would argue, invoked when Godelier (1999:1-15, this volume) suggests that an understanding of Baruya gifting might help address the “widening gap between economy and society” in places like France. Here Godelier juxtaposes

**Baruya:** Keep . . . Give . . . Sell

and

**French:** Family . . . Charity . . . Capitalism
in a way that implies an underlying (translocal and transhistorical) framework of this character:

Family (keeping) . . . Community/charity (giving) . . . Capitalism (selling)

in which the Baruya can be positioned more to the left (with more of their material life occurring in and through family and community) and the French more to the right. It should be noted that Godelier elsewhere (1999:158) shows himself vividly aware of the dangers of modernist historicization and of any simple mapping of space (West-non-West) onto time (modern-primitive). It is his generalization of the keep-give-sell framework to support a particular political and ethical argument that reproduces the kind of historicism he is anxious to move beyond.

The family-community-market taxonomy also maps a familiar pair of ethical positions (Hirschman 1986). On the right hand side we can put the liberal, march-of-progress position that celebrates the loosening of old ties and regards Weberian modernity as an attainable ideal. On the left side we can group positions that celebrate family and locality and oppose efforts to homogenize society or culture. Each stance implies – indeed requires – its polar opposite; hence debates between, for example, “relativists” and “ethnocentrists” occur entirely within modernity (Bhabha 1983, Charusheela 2001). To challenge this particular prefabrication of ethical discourse, then, is not to oppose ethical thought in general but rather to open it up to a larger conversation (Charusheela 2000). In other words, to argue that capitalism is socially dense and thick with cultural meaning is not to offer an apologetics for it. But such an argument does mean that ethical assessments of capitalism must consider the moral qualities
of its sociality and culture, rather than assuming that it has none, or that capitalism and markets can be represented as a mere solvent of the sociality and culture present in other institutions like community and kinship.

Modernity, as described above, also underlies a modern-primitive division of the social sciences in which the modern West, with its allegedly distinct spheres of social life, receives the separate attention of political scientists, sociologists, economists and so forth (with its culture hived off into the humanities), while the primitive world, in which these things are chaotically mingled, is studied by anthropologists. One of results of this disciplinary map is that theories of economy become, by definition, formal, universal, and acultural.4

THE MENTAL AND THE MATERIAL

Let us return to the Baruya, and the activities on the right-hand edge of the keep-give-sell framework. In his 1971 “Salt Currency” article, Godelier describes trading by the Baruya with other groups:

> Trade routes are opened by daring individuals whose names are passed down in oral history. It was they who ran the risks of first contact with a neighboring tribe and who succeeded in establishing amicable relations with some members of the group as well as sealing a kind of peace pact. Normally, such a pact is passed on from generation to generation and one inherits trade partners from one’s father. To give an example of the risks of first contact, about 1942 … some Baruya decided to contact the Watchakès … Three men left, accompanied by a woman to prove their peaceful intentions. They received a warm welcome which put them at ease except for one who stood on his guard. This saved him, because a few hours later the three men were rudely attacked by their hosts; he succeeded in escaping, but his two companions were wounded and were later ritually killed and eaten. The woman was married to one of the murderers. The Baruya organized a punitive expedition which failed because the Watchakès had posted watch in the forest. Nevertheless, some time later, the Baruya made a second attempt to create commercial ties with the Watchakès and this time they succeeded. (Godelier 1971:61-62)

While the story has its unpleasant moments it is hardly a description of asociality.5 It is
stylized and shot through with meanings. The sociality described is deeply bivalent, in the sense that a single pattern of interaction contains both the possibilities of violence and peaceable trade.

Note also that particular trading relationships can be inherited from father to son – a point that is noteworthy given Godelier’s (1999) discussion of father-son transmission of sacred objects in the category of “keeping,” in which he shows that keeping is not simply a failure of something to move, not simply an absence of circulation, but a way of pinning down social meaning, and that this meaning simultaneously inflects other kinds of circulation. Thus the rightmost category of circulation is tied to the leftmost. Essentially the same point can be seen when we read Godelier’s analysis of the circulation of salt by the Baruya, in which the different systems or logics of circulation are far from incompatible with each other; quite the contrary: to grasp Baruya salt production, the complete ensemble of keeping, giving, and trading salt must be considered as a whole. Thus the facts that Baruya trading links are (a) personalized across groups, (b) constructed within a broader, patterned intragroup sociality that contains a set of shared meanings, and (c) passed down the patriline like sacred objects should all lead us to reconsider any notion that trading is essentially asocial and rivalrous.

This ends our critique. We now draw on Godelier’s discussion of the “active presence of thought at the very heart of our material activities” (1986:18) and extend it to market activity and capitalism. As we do this, two further points bear emphasis. The first is the intersubjective importance of the “mental realities, representations, judgments, [and] principles of thought (1986: 10-11)” that are set to work in material activities. When people collaborate to produce something, or participate in a system by which goods circulate among them,
meanings and representations are used and shared. The second point is that while languages
and other symbolic resources may be shared and intersubjective experience may be powerful,
it is quite possible that different people, and especially different groups of people, apply
different and even conflicting meanings to the same material activities (see Godelier 1986:152-
153, 164). Men and women, slaveholders and slaves, bosses and workers may participate in
the same systems of production and/or circulation and yet imagine them differently. They
may imagine different futures. At points of conflict, contending representations of the same
material practices may become important. With these two points, we turn to capitalism.

CAPITALISM AND REPRESENTATION

We draw here on the Post Keynesian tradition. For present purposes, the key characteristic of
Post Keynesian theory is its interest in the time structure of material life: how are the material
processes of production, circulation, and consumption coordinated in and through time? Post
Keynesians point to the real-world importance of forward transactions. When I buy bread at
the supermarket that is a spot transaction, an instantaneous trade leaving no important further
obligation. If payment and the delivery of a good/service occur on different dates I am
making a forward transaction. Purchases of airplane tickets, college educations, cars, houses,
newspaper subscriptions are forward transactions. Capitalist firms work in dense webs of
forward commitments to make and receive goods and services, commitments that cause them
to expect cash payments and to promise to make payments at fixed dates. If there is anything
that sets capitalist and market economies apart from other forms of economic organization, it is
certainly not that they are less intricately time-embedded than other sorts of economies.

This points to a different way to ask questions about social embeddedness. Forward
transactions entail some kind of sociality linking the transactors, however limited or institution mediated it may be. We can then ask what kinds of social ties or institutions constrain or enable forward-transacting of specific types, in particular places and times. An economy in which people make forward commitments to each other is clearly also an economy in which representations matter.

Essential to Keynes’ vision is the question of how we think about the future, something of which we cannot have knowledge because it does not yet exist. Keynes, who was also a probability theorist, treated probabilistic statements as statements of belief rather than fact (Winslow in press). I suggest that these beliefs have the character of representations, with social-cultural characteristics. Discussing decision-making under uncertainty, Keynes wrote that:

Knowing that our individual judgment is worthless, we endeavor to fall back on the judgment of the rest of the world which is perhaps better informed. That is, we endeavor to conform with the behavior of the majority or the average. The psychology of a society of individuals each of whom is endeavoring to copy the others leads to what we may strictly term a conventional judgment. (Keynes 1937:214)

But that this way of proceeding, “being based on so flimsy a foundation,”

is subject to sudden and violent changes. The practice of calmness and immobility, of certainty and security, suddenly breaks down. New fears and hopes will, without warning, take charge of human conduct. The forces of disillusion may suddenly impose a new conventional basis of valuation. All these pretty, polite techniques, made for a well-paneled Board Room and a nicely regulated market, are liable to collapse. (Keynes 1937:214-215)

Note both the necessity of making and holding representations and the structural or systemic properties of a system of widespread representation holding. The point is even clearer in Keynes’ analysis of financial markets (1936:147-164 and passim). The participant in financial markets has to be concerned with what other people believe, and indeed concerned with what others believe others believe, and so forth (1936:156). To put it a different way, the very
coherence of a capitalist economy with active financial markets may depend on the willingness to share representations.

Now consider another aspect of Keynes’ thought. In a discussion of the effects of inflation, he writes that though a situation of rising prices

is a source of gain to the business man, it is also a source of opprobrium. To the consumer the business man’s exceptional profits appear as the cause (instead of the consequence) of the hated rise in prices. Amidst the rapid fluctuations of his fortunes he himself loses his conservative instincts, and begins to think more of the large gains of the moment than of the lesser, but permanent profits of normal business. … With such impulses and so placed, the business man is himself not free from a suppressed uneasiness. In his heart he loses his former self-confidence in his relation to society, in his utility and necessity in the economic scheme. He fears the future of his business and his class, and the less secure he feels his fortune to be the tighter he clings to it. The business man, the prop of society and the builder of the future, to whose activities and rewards there has been accorded, not long ago, an almost religious sanction, he of all men and classes the most respectable, praiseworthy and necessary, with whom interference was not only disastrous but almost impious, was now to suffer sidelong glances, to feel himself suspected and attacked, the victim of unjust and injurious laws – to become, and know himself half-guilty, a profiteer.

No man of spirit will consent to remain poor if he believes his superiors to have gained their goods by lucky gambling. To convert the business man into a profiteer is to strike a blow at capitalism, because it destroys the psychological equilibrium which permits the perpetuance of unequal rewards. The economic doctrine of normal profits, vaguely apprehended by everyone, is a necessary condition for the justification of capitalism. The business man is tolerable so long as his gains can be said to bear some relation to what, roughly and in some sense, his activities have contributed to society.

(Keynes 1923:23-24)

Here Keynes argues that something that raises business profits hurts business, and it hurts business by legitimating damaging representations of it. This analysis assumes a society in which different classes form impressions of each other, in which ideas of dignity and desert matter, and in which political struggle occurs in part through contending representations of the same thing.¹⁹

It is thus not difficult to show that capitalism entails “setting to work mental realities, representations, judgments, principles of thought (Godelier 1986: 10-11)” which include
... alongside representations of nature and humanity itself, representations of the aims, means, stages and anticipated results of human activities on nature and society – representations which simultaneously organize a sequence of events and legitimize the location and status of agents in society. [Godelier 1986: 11]

These representations make capitalism possible but also unstable and uncertain. We have sketched only the outlines of an analysis of capitalism and markets in which cultural processes are given their due, and we should again emphasize that Post Keynesianism is only one of several heterodoxies with ideas relevant to this project. But to undertake this effort is to begin reconstructing a non-modernist social science, one that provincializes and re-problematizes capitalism.

NOTES

1. For comments I thank Duran Bell, Michael Billig, S. Charusheela, and Cynthia Werner.
2. Please see Danby 2002 for a more extended discussion of this framework and its development in the work of Malinowski, Mauss, and Sahlins.
4. See also Godelier 1972:282 and 1986:198. Unfortunately substantivists conceded the analysis of capitalism to the formalists and confined themselves to a smaller debate over whether formalism could understand noncapitalism. Insights about the cultural life of capitalism from the Institutionalist tradition (a source for substantivism) were lost (Neale and Mayhew 1993) and “economic” theory came to mean certain varieties of formalism. Contemporary texts in Economic Anthropology (e.g. Plattner 1989:6) present a menu of economic theories winnowed to two choices – neoclassical economics and orthodox Marxism – ignoring heterodox traditions.
5. Utter asociality would be something like the “silent trade,” which may be an ethnographic chimera (Narotzky 1997:54). If it is chimerical, its persistence as an idea might be explained by its role as place-holder for degree-zero sociality in the larger taxonomy. The neoclassical market model – wordless trade, without merchants – is strikingly similar.
6. See Danby 2002 for a fuller exposition of Post Keynesianism theory as it is relevant to economic anthropology. The canonical survey is Hamouda and Harcourt 1988.
7. Post Keynesian analysis thus disputes Gregory’s (1982) depiction of commerce as not characterized by long-term ties. See also Mirowski 2001, 444-446.
9. Compare Godelier 1986:13, 156-164. Keynes draws on an older tradition in political economy, evident in Smith but now thwarted by a compartmentalized social science, which took shared ideas and states of belief very seriously – a markedly superstructural notion of “base.” See Winslow (in press) for an examination of some of these aspects of Keynes’ thought in a different theoretical framework.
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