

Capitalism, Acts of Labor and their Contested Recognition

Questions about capitalism, labor and class are currently receiving new interest, especially as inequalities are on the rise – along with a sense of crisis of the world economic system. We see a revisiting of the grand theories of capitalism and analyses of the reproductions of inequality, like in the work of Thomas Piketty, among others. Important as these contributions are, they pay little attention to the ways in which people in different contexts deal with and seek to mediate inequality and its consequences. Beyond quantitative analysis and grand theories, therefore, we need a better understanding of how actual people deal with actual problems. Although enjoying less recognition than grand theories, feminists have importantly called for ethnographic attention to how people mediate divergent social institutions through acts of labor; to deal with the various demands and rhythms of the institutions that affect everyday lives, like those of production, consumption, governance, finance and social reproduction (Bear 2014, Bear et al. 2015). But how can we include into our understanding those acts of labor that are not necessarily recognized as such, in considering the social formation of capital and inequality?

In my own research in Arequipa, Peru, I have been concerned with the ways in which migrants strive to make a living by engaging in small-scale market work and cross-border trade, often at the margins of formality although not outrightly illegal. Living the life of the urban poor, Quechua and Aymara migrants often maintain their rural ways and relations, while making a living through vending and trading – sometimes with a certain success in economic terms. While the reliance on trade among many Peruvians can throw light on the effects of capitalist austerity policies and neoliberal reforms, it significantly reflects not least the continuities of social networks that are embedded in long-standing socio-spatial practices in the Andes. These networks and practices are part of Peruvian history and identity that the modernizing nation state

has suppressed and seemingly left behind in the name of progress and a universalized mestizo identity. These are the socialities of migrants who move between the highlands and coastal cities, often referred to with a pejorative undertone as *cholos* (-as).

Being somewhat ambiguously positioned and envisioned in-between racialized and class-based categories such as indigenous and mestizo, rural and urban, the migrants seem to both convey and resist the post-colonial legacies and intersections between class, gender and racialized conditions in Peruvian society. I have found that a thorough look at the historical and situational dimensions of these intersections is key to understanding how such – apparently marginal – practices of vending represent commonplace responses to social inequalities and wider global capitalist transformations (e.g. Ødegaard 2018). Central to my analysis has been the social relation, not just because this is where good ethnography often starts, but also because it is what defines practices of vending; more specifically, relations with kin and colleagues, public functionaries and more powerful others. Such relations are essential for the acts of labor through which vendors mediate the demands of both formal and informal social institutions – and for the constitution of class, gender and racialized conditions.

While a grand theory approach does not do justice to the situated and historical specificities of the Arequipa marketplace, the *Gens* Manifesto offers a better lens to study the practices of local vendors. In my work amidst everyday lives and economies at the margins of formality – often going “under the radar” of authorities and social theorists alike – I have relied on insights from substantivist anthropology and feminist scholarship. A *Gens* perspective for the study of capitalism proposes attention to gender, kinship and relationally generative processes in particular – and, in turn, to the generative powers of capitalism and the inequalities that these powers create. This importantly entails a non-sectorial approach to economic life, implying that there is no such thing as “the economy” separate(d) from life. The fact that we

often like to think so reflects an ideologically produced dichotomy – and can partly explain what seems to be a widespread lack of interest in “economic matters”. But how can one understand economy and work in a context where wage labor for many people is largely unavailable? Would the labeling of these forms of work as simply “informal” not contribute to downplaying them as the marginal yet universal effects of a general trajectory of capitalist transformation?



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The volcano Misti and the marketplace: Arequipa is a convenient regional distribution point for the commercialization of goods between highland and coast – and providing income for the city's many Andean migrants, among others. Copyright: Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard

Situated tactics and enactments of gendered identities

With its location on the slopes of the Andes and as the second-largest Peruvian city Arequipa is an important regional distribution point for trade between highland and coast; a convenient location for the commercialization of both agricultural produce and undocumented industrial goods imported from Bolivia and Chile. The vendors are often predominantly women and it is said that vending is “women’s work”; the only income-source available to women from lower-class rural backgrounds. In many cases they are also accompanied by their male partners and kin, as men’s employment opportunities can be highly unpredictable too.

By most Peruvians, the work of vendors, especially women, is nonetheless considered “not really work” and is associated primarily with the household and reproduction. Interestingly, however, there is at the same time a notion that public authorities have “more respect for women”. Indeed, some public functionaries told me that they find it difficult to intervene in these businesses as “there are no other jobs to get anyway”. A woman involved in the sale of second-hand clothes from plastic bags in a huge parking lot explained that some women from Puno take care of commodity imports from Chile and that they are in charge of the whole business: “These women can earn money from anything”, she said. “They even fight the police. If they were men, they would have been put to jail. But not with the women. They [that is, the functionaries] have more respect for women. For this reason, vending is easier for women”. This crucial notion of “respect” appears to hinge on the commonsense idea that women are seen as responsible mothers. It indicates the significance of constructions of womanhood for how vending and interferences in vending are negotiated, sometimes to the advantage of female vendors.

On several occasions, vendors have explained to me that whenever fiscal, customs or

police authorities interfere, they may try to make excuses by representing themselves as humble and poor; underlining that they only seek to support their families and claiming that they did not know it was not allowed, that they cannot read and write and that the officials must understand and forgive them. This way of deliberately representing themselves as humble but responsible mothers and household providers (as a strategic essentialism of sorts) – and disassociating themselves from commercial activities – may sometimes contribute to facilitate women’s involvement in vending (although this does not mean that vendors are not also exposed to abuse by public functionaries). On the other hand, though, such forms of representation can contribute to confirm a devalorization of women’s work in vending, i.e. as not important enough for the authorities to interfere due to a view that it is men who do the “real work” and women’s work is seen as “extra” (see also Lazar 2008). It indicates how binaries like public/private or formal/informal contribute to ordering forms of labor in a hierarchy of value. Nonetheless, the case of Quechua and Aymara vendors still serves to demonstrate the generative aspect of acts of labor mediated through gender and kinship relations – and how these are key to the navigation between formal requirements and situated tactics.

„Generative” labor and socialities across social institutions

The marketplaces of Arequipa are generally bustling. Vending operations are largely kinship-based and involve the help of partners and kin: assisting in the vending business, maintaining market stalls, and contributing to collective labor at the marketplace. Depending on relations of mutual exchange, trust and cooperation, vendors intensively cultivate social relations through sharing and gift-giving, by establishing familial connections through godparenthood, and by maintaining stable relationships with customers and suppliers. Although vending at the margins of formality can be both precarious and risky, vendors emphasize that they just have to go on “with their eyes closed”, in order to support their children – and simultaneously valuing this work for the freedom and autonomy it affords.

Some scholars have proposed the term “immaterial labor” to pinpoint the increase of work in service sectors where no material or durable goods are produced (e.g. in health care, education, finance, transportation). The argument goes that in an “informational economy”, social relations, communication systems, information and affective networks have made such immaterial (or affective) labor increasingly crucial and, therefore, more highly valued (Hardt and Negri 2000). Such arguments about the “shift” towards affective labor are clearly developed on the basis of everyday experiences from the global North, where service sector work has expanded partly at the cost of industrial work, while the service sectors in the global South more significantly expand through the inclusion of former subsistence peasants. Further, the “affective labor” line of argument overlooks an important insight from feminist scholarship. The authors of the *Gens* initiative problematize the distinction between the “instrumental action of economic production” and the “communicative action of human relation” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 293), by emphasizing how such distinctions may in fact re-affirm ideological constructs. Indeed, if treating this distinction as an objective difference, one will miss a central argument from feminist scholars, namely that it is through the making of such categorical distinctions among human actors and activities that inequality is generated (Yanagisako 2012).

While the term immaterial or affective labor entails an acknowledgement of the feminist argument that unpaid reproductive work is as productive (socially and otherwise) as industrial labor, it simultaneously entails a new binary in which immaterial labor is imbued with affect while industrial labor is devoid of it. Not only does such an approach erroneously attribute inherently different creative energies and communicative powers to different forms of labor. The distinction also obscures the communicative dimension of all human action, including capitalist production and circulation (Bear et al. 2015). If labor can be understood as the generation of value, we must understand how class, gender and power relations crosscut the supposedly different regimes of productive and reproductive (or affective) labor.

These relations in turn create and allocate value that may both support and evade accumulation in such regimes. Such value may be economic and monetary – but may entail also “relational value”.

The work of Andean vendors is certainly not easy to categorize or define: on the one hand, it can be considered as a form of service-provision, as vendors offer goods to customers and retailers at low prices. On the other hand, they also engage in more conventional production, e.g. in kinds of food processing that would be considered productive if done in a factory (Babb 2001). Vending often entails heavy physical (and collectively organized) labor in the sense that vendors use their own bodies to construct the marketplace infrastructure where they work – and to bring the goods to the urban hubs, often by bus from the countryside or across the borders. The notion of “affective labor” does not sufficiently do merit to these women’s work. Rather, their work relies on a form of non-wage, relational and entrepreneurial “generative labor”, that is, acts of labor that generate value (economic and relational) by mediating diverging demands and cultivating relations across formal and informal dimensions of vending.

Although these trading networks may appear as complicit with the capitalist ethos of commodity flow, entrepreneurship and accumulation, vendors develop their economic tactics on their own terms, seeking to claim urban spaces from which they have been excluded – and continually seeking ways to circumvent official interference. They work to redirect commodity flow away from official circuits and subsume wealth to other kinds of sociality and distribution, by investing in kin, colleagues, and earth beings (see also Gandolfo 2013, Müller 2020). Hence, their work both builds upon and generates relational value that contributes to the distribution and diversification of monetary value.

Attention to acts of labor that crosscut distinctions, such as formal/informal or public/private, involves a focus on aspects of inequality that are often invisible and unaccountable to state institutions. These acts of labor are part of social relations

that significantly contribute not only to the accumulation of wealth in society (Bear 2014, Babb 2001), but also to the distribution and diversion of wealth outside the reach of both the state and lead firms, like in the case of vendors. The ongoing efforts to understand and contest capitalism and its hold on the world must therefore not disregard economic diversity but pay attention to acts of labor and mediation across socio-economic landscapes. This can be an important site to rethink the authority of capitalism in our lives (Tsing 2015) and to formulate alternatives. Not least can it be a way to bring current initiatives to decolonize knowledge into sets of questions that have hitherto received less attention in decolonization debates, that is, capitalist economic life and relations, in order to foster better understandings and critique beyond formalist analysis.

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