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Epilogue: Why do we need the Gens Manifesto?

Economic anthropology considers foundational aspects of the human condition, and its insights ought to be widely understood across the social sciences. However, this is rarely the case, and only a handful of the field's major works have so far reached a wide audience (Graeber 2011; Mauss 2002; Sahlins 1972). The challenges facing the discipline are understandable, since the non-specialist might intuitively wonder why we need anthropological perspectives on a domain of life that is already the province of economists.

In careful words, the *Gens Manifesto* communicates the mission of economic anthropology in a way that should be intelligible to a non-specialist (Bear et al. 2015). *Gens* explains that we need *anthropologists* to understand contemporary economic life, because capitalism is a complex and socially embedded set of historically contingent processes; it is not a monolithic agent driven solely by a single, coherent logic. Furthermore, *Gens* shows that it is anthropologically misconceived to think of the economy as a discrete domain; all economic action must necessarily be understood in relationship to structures of meaning, identity, difference, and power. By presenting these anthropological points as a manifesto, the work projects an affect of radicalism that is exciting. *Gens* has also played an important role in making economic anthropology's intellectual debts to Feminism more explicit, for an audience that has too often been ignorant of them.

For several years I have included *Gens* on the syllabus of an economic anthropology course in a British university. I have done so because the work succinctly expresses a foundational assumption of that course: that economy is complex and indivisible from wider social life. On these terms, I think that many of the central assumptions of *Gens* are correct, and are consistent with the mission of anthropology itself.

However, now that I am challenged to write an epilogue to this series of comments, I find that I am uncertain about the presentation of *Gens* as a *manifesto*. Many of the core *Gens* propositions were embedded within economic anthropology a long time before the work was published. More broadly, the blunt economic determinism that *Gens* implies for theories of capitalism elides the subtlety of scholarship in this area.

What does this all mean? It means that I like *Gens*, but I think that the best parts are not new. In this comment, I explain why I think this by discussing two things. First, I discuss how the social sciences thinks about the relationship between economic processes and wider forms of human action. Here I argue that most scholars have not seen economy as a bounded sphere for some time. Second, I discuss how the humanities and social sciences think about capitalism. Here, I argue that there is more appreciation of culture and historical contingency in scholarship on capitalism than *Gens* implies. To understand that contingency, it is not necessary to abandon the idea that capitalism has an essential logic.

Economy

Gens is explicit in expressing its indebtedness to feminist scholarship on economy. One of the primary contributions of *Gens* is to render this tradition visible and worthwhile to an audience that may be unfamiliar with it. This is not an exercise in hollow citation politics; the enduring weight of intellectual patriarchy still silos Feminism to the extent that entire areas of the academy fail to know those ideas, let alone engage them in a substantive fashion. On these terms, I understand *Gens* as a project whose aims are consistent with recent efforts to 'decolonize' the academy (Sanchez 2023). By expanding the intellectual canon, we might all be inspired to think in new and more productive ways (ibid: 442). However, many of the ideas articulated in *Gens* are not themselves new.

Gens aims to establish ideas about work and value that are less bound by binary and hierarchical distinctions that are patriarchal in nature. In this series of comments,

the thoughtful contributions of Camilla Carabini, Stefan Leins, Joana Nascimento, and Cecilie Vindal Odegaard have demonstrated the value of thinking beyond such binaries. Such a mission is important, since there are still anthropologists that see material and/or wage labour as more 'real' economic objects than immaterial and/or affective labour. However, such critiques are not conceptually novel, since they form the core of Silvia Federici's now classic writings on economy and value (Federici 1975, 2014 [2004]). The authors' citation of Nicole Constable also points towards a substantial body of major ethnographic research on domestic and caring work that has productively troubled the binary distinction between material and immaterial labour (Constable 2007; Gill 1994). Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre's contribution suggests a history of conceptual innovation in that field. Elsewhere, a rich tradition of research on *intimacy as work* has also made valuable progress in locating such practices within a non-hierarchical model of value and economy (Bornstein 2007; Zelizer 2005).

Gens questions the tendency of anthropological scholarship to structure its analysis around a reductive and relentlessly imagined 'economic logic'. It feels intuitively correct that universal economic logics cannot capture the breadth and complexity of human action. However, as I now search for examples of such approaches in anthropological scholarship, I find that that they are scant and generally not influential (for the sake of tact I do not cite such studies here). In fields where economic anthropologists have been most enamored with universal questions (such as the study of gift exchange), the answers themselves have almost always been grounded in the complexity of local experience, and the principle of analytic holism (Parry 1986; Weiner 1992; Yan 1996). Even in the mid-20th century, when economic logics were ostensibly at their apex in anthropological analysis, Scott Cook formulated a well-evidenced argument that allegations of formalist reduction were themselves misrepresentative (Cook 1966).

Elsewhere, for the 20th century Marxist scholarship that seemed most constrained by

materialism, this did not usually generate analyses that searched for economic logics *to the exclusion* of understanding social complexity. On the contrary, much of that scholarship was profoundly concerned with the lived experience of kinship, gender, and the household (Bloch 1975; Godelier 1986; Leacock 1978; Meillasoux 1981). Where Marxist anthropologists of that period addressed the emergence of marketisation, they were likewise driven by an effort to erode the boundaries between the economic and other localized aspects of life (Nash 1979; Taussig 1980). Marxist analysis need not be regarded as anthropologically reductive; indeed the contributions of Ryan Davey & Andreas Streinzer, and Christof Lammer & André Thiemann suggest that contemporary ethnographers might still engage with Marx in innovative and useful ways.

Gens is correct in its claims about what 'economy' ought to mean. However, those claims are not conceptually novel. Most anthropologists have not typically reduced economy to a bounded domain that functions according to a reductive logic. The next section of this comment considers how *Gens* approaches theories of capitalism.



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Capitalism

Gens argues that capitalism is a non-singular, and historically contingent set of processes. On these terms, *Gens* is consistent with the core assumptions of

economic anthropology. Although there is much precedent in the humanities for reductive accounts of capitalism that tend towards abstract models (Cornforth 1961), this is not generally the case within anthropological scholarship. In studies of the typically capitalist objects of wage-labour, and money there is recurrent emphasis on the fact that marketisation doesn't work the same way everywhere, and that its evolution through time cannot be predicted (Breton 1996; High 2013; Ong 1987, 2006; Parry 1999; Walsh 2003).

Gens sees scholarship on neoliberalism in particular as limiting in its tendency to assign agency and coherence to something that is fractured and volatile. The proposition that capitalism exists in encounters and processes was insightfully explored in the *Gens* authors' own work (Tsing 2005). However, these points are also addressed in other major scholarship outside the discipline (Sassen 2014). Moreover, although influential research on neoliberalism has seemingly suggested a coherent agenda for dispossession (Harvey 2004), it has also addressed the sometimes-unintentional nature of systemic financial crisis (Harvey 2010). That same scholarship has also extensively considered questions of space, time, struggle and other traditionally 'non-economic' things of the type that animate *Gens* (Harvey 2012). More strikingly still, the focus on contingency was embedded within the Marxist theories of capitalism that predate neoliberalism.

The *Gens* argument that political-economic structures are partly formed by contingent encounters sits at the core of Marxist historiography (Thompson 1991 [1963]; Stedman Jones 1983). In the mid-20th century historians such as E.P. Thompson argued that although capitalism was real, it was not singular, and its movement through time could not be predicted (cf Sanchez and Strümpell 2014). By the late 1970s, Thompson had systematised his emphasis on contingency in an influential critique of French Structural Marxism (1978). Importantly, Thompson's writings in this field were not sacrilege to a prevailing Marxist orthodoxy; both Gramsci and Polanyi had also highlighted how capitalism's projection of strength

masked an internal lack of coherence, and the potential for unplanned collapse and crisis (cf Burawoy 2003). By the late 20th century, the tendency to see capitalism as a static structure with a singular agency was anachronistic to most scholarly thinking on the topic.

However, even if most theorists have embraced the notion of capitalism as a contingent set of processes, *Gens* diverges by insisting against the existence of any essential capitalist *logic*. But if capitalism has no agency, coherence, or logic, then how can it exist in a sense that is conceptually substantive enough to demand its own manifesto? I wonder if it is possible to attain the anthropological subtlety that *Gens* strives for, without abandoning the idea that there is a logic to capitalism after all. The essential logic of capitalism is the exploitative extraction of profit from the economic activity of other people. That logic needn't be experienced in the same way everywhere, and it would rarely negate other aspects of the human condition. As Andrea Muehlebach and Mario Schmidt have argued in this series, the value of an anthropological analysis of economy is that is considers the durability and coherence of capitalism, as well as its limits and fantasies. An appreciation of this fact has allowed generations of creative scholarship to understand the contingent encounters of capitalism.

Conclusion

I disagree with the *Gens* claim that capitalism has no essential logic; this assertion seems an unnecessary conceptual erosion of the manifesto's object of study. However, I agree with almost all of the other core *Gens* propositions, which I understand to be embedded within the project of economic anthropology. I have said critical things about the conceptual innovation of *Gens*, but I believe that we *need* it, and this is for two reasons:

First, *Gens* is an accessible and engaging statement of what economic anthropology is about, and why it is worth doing. By making economic anthropology legible and

relevant, *Gens* has inspired other people to collect new data, and to develop new ideas. Irrespective of whether I think the *Gens* ideas are novel, the project now sits firmly within the stream of anthropological history, and is productive in ways that few pieces of work can be. It is easy to throw stones, but it is much harder to build them into something useful.

Second, *Gens* highlights the often-unacknowledged debt that understandings of economy owe to Feminism. Such awareness has been traditionally lacking, owing to an implicit patriarchy that is so engrained in canonical scholarship that it doesn't even *think to look elsewhere*. As *Gens* had acquired more prominence, this type of ignorance in economic anthropology is increasingly less common. My own reading of recent work in the field leads me to believe that the achievements of *Gens* are considerable.

So, I don't like everything about the *Gens Manifesto*. But I respect and appreciate it enough, that I feel honoured to write this epilogue.

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