On the Poverty of Grand Theories

An Interview with the Authors of 'Gens': Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako

This *boasblog* discusses a feminist approach to the study of capitalism. At the center of our debate lies 'Gens', a seminal manifesto published in 2015. Proposing a research program beyond the established theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, or Michel Callon, 'Gens' argues for ethnographic detail and a relational, generative understanding of capitalism. While our blog features the German translation of 'Gens', we also wish to expand, better understand, and critically review this program. To get an initial grip on its actuality, Tim Burger interviewed the four authors of 'Gens'. The interview took place via email, with Tim sending questions and the authors carefully considering their responses. This prolonged process allowed Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako to reply with a single voice and to reflect on the background, genealogy, and topicality of the 'Gens' approach.

A similar project of debating the manifesto and stressing its authors' more recent perspectives is currently taking place in the francophone context, following Paola Juan's French translation. For more information see the special section in the journal *Terrain*, co-organized by Anne-Christine Trémon.

Tim Burger (TB): What provided the initial impetus to write the Gens Manifesto? And could you tell us what made the form of a "manifesto" appealing to you?

Laura Bear, *Karen Ho*, *Anna Tsing*, *Sylvia Yanagisako* (*Gens authors*): Gens grew out of our shared sense that there was an abundance of theoretical work on the anthropology of capitalism that was not recognized or cited as such. Instead,

anthropological insights about capitalism were confined to being merely an 'instance' or specific illustration of grand theories of capitalism, usually taken from sociology, political economy or geography. Not only were these insights or stories slotted into "small-scale" case studies or small stories, but also, grand narratives were simply "scaled up" without recognizing the contingent work, translations, interconnections, and unexpected configurations that go into constructing "large-scale" capitalist projects in the first place. In other words, the very imagining of a grand or large-scale process was often seamlessly presumed, and anthropological insights were mobilized to reproduce those grand narratives. We thus sought to unpack the theoretical consequences and politics of such a scaling, recognizing that totalizing frames could inadvertently over-empower capitalist projects and dreams (Gibson-Graham). But, of course, all such scaling has a politics (Law, Tsing) that are linked to wars of position in forms of accumulation. In April 2013, the four of us met at Stanford University for two days of discussion and intensive co-writing. We projected what we wrote onto a whiteboard, creating together in real time. We later continued to write in a google doc sometimes simultaneously in spite of wide time-zone differences. This collaborative work also modelled cooperative authorial practices in the academy that we wanted to help flourish. We also discussed inclusive citation practices as a way of amplifying the contribution of feminist studies of capitalism.

A manifesto is a declaration of an intention, a call to action and a promise. At our initial meeting we decided that by writing a manifesto we could make visible lost and neglected feminist inheritances in a comprehensive statement of their analytical contributions. We concluded that dominant accounts at the time were of four kinds. One was focussed on vast processes of 'primitive accumulation,' 'class formation,"globalisation' or 'Empire' using teleological transition narratives derived from particular Marxist and Euro-American centred perspectives. Another was inspired by Callon and mistook devices for the translation of value in exchange relations as 'the economy' and ignored the question of accumulation. The third

studied either the 'experts' of capitalism (for example in financial institutions) or "the marginalized," which suspended the question of consequences and causality particularly in relation to inequality. Fourth, many cultural studies of economy or studies of market societies implicitly framed and categorized "economy" and "society" into separate domains even as these studies called for the "embedding" of one into the other. (One could argue, of course, that the very conceptual idea of "embedding" further reproduces the problematic of separate domains). We thus sought to question what sets of practices gets associated with which domains, and further, the very constitution of a domain in the first place. Our manifesto was a call to free anthropologists' imagination from the constraints of these approaches by drawing on insights from feminist theories.

Out of our initial discussion and co-writing at Stanford we developed a proposal for a roundtable titled "Generating Capitalism: Diverse Livelihoods and Productive Powers" at the American Anthropological Association meetings at Chicago in November 2013. Our idea was to mobilise analytic insights from several generations of anthropologists of capitalism to highlight our discipline's theoretical significance and disrupt the marginalisation of anthropology and the non-European contexts from which it often studies capitalism. In order to include a larger number of anthropologists in our discussion we changed our roundtable into an informal meeting in which we included younger anthropologists who later wrote pieces accompanying the manifesto. We also hoped the manifesto would be a call for creation rather than a prescriptive document. The wide circulation of the Theorizing the Contemporary feature on the Cultural Anthropology website, including its open access and reputation as a place where debates could be started in real time, fit well with our goals for the manifesto. We wanted it to be generative rather than to capture and direct people's work-energies. That was our promise, and we are very happy to see that people in so many places and with so many interests have engaged with it. This includes the scholars in this volume. Be generative would be our 'motto.'

TB: As you argue in the Manifesto, the canon of economic anthropology (or anthropology in general) took little notice of feminist substantivism. You chose to make it the centerpiece of your intervention. If "feminist substantivism" would become a more established frame or lineage, where would you see its limits? Why is now a good time to launch it as an analytic?

Gens authors: We represent two generations of anthropologists shaped by the substantivist feminism of the 1980s, gendered analyses of global capitalism in the 1990s to 2000s, post-colonial and critical race analyses of gender and racialization in the same period and more recent inquiries into speculation, finance, and debt. Substantivist feminism is crucial here because of its inquiries into the fundamental inequalities and relations of exploitation and expropriation underpinned by the domaining of public and private, male and female, free and unfree, possession and dispossession, and other apparently 'natural' distinctions. In these arguments, it is not gender that comes first as a primary form of inequality, but rather that inequality is built on the constructed foundations of naturalised distinctions. Once these distinctions are generated they are used to evaluate the ethical worth of the life-forces and creativity of people and things, including the land itself. These naturalisations orient moral judgements and speculations. Projections of worth based on them at times take the form of calculative devices or legal contracts and at others intimate or distancing relations. These distinctions could be between public and private; groups of people with inherent qualities verses those who lack these; citizens and non-citizens; kin and non-kin; resources that are useful versus useless; tasks that are work or leisure, paid or unpaid. Herein lies the centrality of race, sexuality and gender to all processes of distinction in capitalism. They are not 'added' into the wage (or un-waged) relation or the citizenship relation or domestic relation or property relation. Rather, race, gender, class and sexuality are all there at once underpinning inequalities and generating accumulation. The content of these social categories, of course, varies historically, but in capitalism they are always used to evaluate worth and secure accumulation from people and things. This is why

capitalism only offers degrees of (un)freedom rather than absolute freedom. This also explains why capitalism is so productive and enticing—it offers us existential and relational ways to be through our work and life rather than simply wages, capital or credit. We have the sense that we can only be and become ourselves or a collective through its relations. Marxist analyses have had little success in explaining the persistence of capitalism and why people sustain faith in its productivity in spite of its cruelty, ravaging of the planet, and chronic instability. This faith is sustained because people's and the world's productive powers or life-forces are yoked to its fundamental, naturalised social hierarchies and evaluations of worth.

Gendered analyses of globalisation, transnational racial formations, coloniality and postcoloniality from the 1990s to 2000s provide more than a decade of work that supports this theoretical perspective. From investigating colonial domesticity to the aspirations of sex-workers; from juxtaposing female global factory workers and global care labour; through analysing migration, borders, and carcerality; and through the exploration of multiple labouring subjects, from the unemployed to the lives of tech employees or financial specialists, the thinness of class analysis and the absence of a pure class politics is clearly visible. Again and again, anthropological histories and ethnographies have shown how kinship, desire, ethics and affect are central to both colonialism and capitalism. This too has been part of the work of feminist Marxists studying the rise of capitalism, social reproduction and post-industrial Europe's declining welfare regimes, as well as the work of critical scholars of race, indigeneity, gender and sexuality that demonstrate the centrality of enslavement, colonialism, and settler colonialism – the thefts of labour and land – to capitalism's condition of possibility. Why then are grand theories of capitalism so impoverished and a class analysis based on wage labour and/or primitive accumulation still so dominant? It is as if grand theorists don't want to or can't grasp the fractal complexity of capitalism. This is also a huge problem, because if we can't grasp capitalism then we can't know how or where to act to change it.

Perhaps these two things—the question of the poverty of grand theories and the political problem are related? Grand theories hold onto the purity of their models because they are nostalgic for a never-quite existing class politics based on the figuration of an ideal worker. This is an imaginary politics that does not recognize the contingent arrangements of accumulation as they really are. It is also at times a nostalgic politics that focusses on a time in which 'the working-classes' had a better accommodation with the state and market than in the present. This of course ignores the exclusions of who could count as fully working class within the union politics of the post-World War II period – the white, male citizen and more generally a wage-labour defined aristocracy of workers for the state and private enterprise. It also does not recognize the varying privileges certain citizens had over others and non-citizens within this era of 'post-fordism, nor does it recognize that expropriated labours and land of "dependent" subjects have long undergirded the relative freedom of so-called ideal citizens. Nationalist politics have always been exclusionary – and this is not a recent phenomenon of popularism in Europe and elsewhere. To sum up, for us a class-focussed theory and politics cannot 'liberate' on its own. This is because Marxism understands social and non-human relations through an ideal form rather than as an actually existing web of social relations sutured together by contracts and practices that extract value. Our hope in writing a manifesto inspired by decades of anthropological research was to generate a close-to-the-ground analysis of accumulation and exploitation that would recognize the value of multiple forms of politics and enable the identification of core nodes and practices of accumulation that need to be dismantled for us to live differently. These might include the wage relation, but also could be formations that include non-waged labour, state debt, financial contract, informalised labour, bonded labour, slavery, inheritance, insurance, credit, care, aspiration, kinship, nationalism and responsibility. In other words, we have to explore and then act on the means through which forces of generation, accumulation, and death are distributed unequally. Although all the evidence shows that in the present historical formation of capitalism key arenas for political movements would be around care labour and

relations, environmental devastation, racism and state debt, these arenas are treated as 'outside' capitalism even though chronic crises and scandals reveal them to be central to it and highly vulnerable to its predations and capture. They are also arenas for explicitly moral arguments where demands for recognition of the positive value of life and generativity can be made. We have shown in our work, for example, that financial tools, state debt, family firms and delimited contracts along with the gendered and raced persons and relations that are connected to these are crucial in contemporary capitalism.

Thus, far from seeing the limitations of feminist substantivism, we think that recent upheavals of the world, particularly of popularism, nationalism, environmental crisis and the pandemic, demonstrate the analytic power of a generative approach. Returning to the four approaches that were dominant in anthropology when we wrote our manifesto, we think that a grand theory approach to the study of capitalism apart from questions of accumulation cannot help us to comprehend these upheavals. Instead, popularism has emerged as a nationalist figuration of a 'taking back' of control of productive powers by post-industrial workers disenfranchised in global capitalism, even more so with the rise of China. In places like India, on the other hand, Hindu nationalism offers a generative model of a national destiny of releasing productivity even though liberalisation has been an austerity regime intensifying inequalities at many sites. The tangible effects of environmental crisis along with the widespread use of the term 'the anthropocene' is generating moral claims for future generations and speculation in conversion devices such as reparations to the global south and green bonds. Conversions of the value of the environment are clearly underway between lifeworld experiences, politics and profits. Finally, Covid has revealed in the most stark manner the foundation of 'the economy' in the sustaining of human life and human relations. The care of governments and care within families and kin networks have all been disrupted and remade. We remain hopeful that these last two phenomenon have the seeds of an a-capital or beside-capital approach to regenerating life and the world.

TB: What would you say changed in your approach between the original publication in 2015 and this blog in 2023? In how far would you have to adapt some of its arguments or directions in the light of pandemics, new wars, and other crises? Why is it (still) valuable to think with 'Gens' through today's world?

Gens authors: In light of the upheavals and crises discussed above, we are prepared to go one step further than our earlier position. Within the current conjuncture since the 1990s, global capitalism has at its core (and possibly always has) the practices of the household and kinship. What we mean by this is that wide-ranging ethnographies of the commodification of intimacy, migration networks and remittances, personal and family debt and financial contracts have shown that the productive powers of kinship are at the core. Our kin labour of speculation, aspiration, juggling of multiple debts across generations, inheritance, education, childcare and elder care have been central to financialised, global capitalism and the regeneration of workforces in global outsourcing regimes. It was the contradictions of this that were impossible to sustain in the financial crisis of 2008 and, more recently, covid and post-covid crises that revealed the centrality of kinship and the household to 'the economy.' In the present moment 'household' inflation and debt are crucial to the decision-making of national governments across the world. Government economists faced with the consequences of harnessing the productive powers of kinship are forced more and more to recognize the significance of its relational and regenerative powers. They also have to figure out how to harness these powers of kinship to processes of capitalist accumulation – a task that is proving very difficult to manage with their standard tools of intervention.

*Professor **Laura Bear** (PhD University of Michigan) specializes in the anthropology of the economy, infrastructures and time. Her current research focusses on the Covid-19 pandemic, infrastructures of care and emerging practices of the public good. Her most recent book based on ESRC funded research in India, Navigating Austerity (2015), addresses two key questions of our era: why does austerity dominate in state policy and*

how can we change this? Drawing on the experiences of boatmen, shipyard workers, hydrographers, port bureaucrats and river pilots on the Hooghly in West Bengal it proposes a social calculus. This measures policy according to the qualities of the social relations it generates and the ability it creates to plan for the future among precarious communities. This has led to comparative research on communities along the Thames in the UK and into local experiments in cooperative and post-growth economies in rural Japan. The goal of all of these projects is to build an innovative practice of the public good that can renew communities and citizen-state relations.

***Karen Ho** is a Professor in the Department Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her research centers on the problematic of understanding and representing financial markets, sites that are resistant to cultural analysis. Her domain of interest is the anthropology of economy, with specific foci on financialization; capitalism; corporations; socio-economic inequalities; and critical race and feminist studies. Her ethnography, Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street (Duke University Press, 2009) was based on three years of fieldwork among investment bankers and major financial institutions. Recent publications include "Markets, Myths, and Misrecognitions: Economic Populism in the Age of Financialization and Hyperinequality. (Economic Anthropology, 2018); "What Happened to Social Facts?" (American Anthropologist, co-edited, 2019); "In the Name of Shareholder Value: Origin Myths of Corporations and Their Ongoing Implications" (Seattle Law Review, 2020); "Why the Stock Market is Rising Amidst a Pandemic and Record, Racialized Inequality" (American Ethnologist online, 2020), and "Markets, Finance, Whiteness, and the American Dream" (Routledge 2022). Her forthcoming book, Financial Afterlives (Duke University Press) is especially concerned with the ongoing ramifications of financialization-gone-wild: increased socio-economic inequality, and racialized extraction and scapegoating.*

***Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing** is a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, as well as at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her most recent collaborative*

project is the book Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene (Stanford University Press), which works to extend the digital project Feral Atlas: The More-than-Human Anthropocene (www.feralatlas.org). She is the author of several books, including Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection and The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (both from Princeton University Press).

***Sylvia Yanagisako** is the Edward Clark Crossett Professor of Humanistic Studies and Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University. Her research and publications have focused on kinship, gender, and capitalism. Her book, Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy (Princeton University Press, 2002), was based on intensive ethnographic research on family firms in the silk industry of Como, Italy. Her latest book, Fabricating Transnational Capitalism (Duke University Press, 2019), co-authored by Lisa Rofel, is a collaborative ethnography of Italian-Chinese joint ventures in global fashion.*

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