Queries on Cultural Capitalism
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Abstract
This is a review essay of three works which offer poignant critiques of analyses and representations of capitalism as a universal category. Through empirical case studies, the authors refine and even subvert the homogenization narrative of globalization and capitalist history, and the concomitant assertion of the inevitability of the unilinear integration of local ‘tradition’-bound communities into the global space-time of modernity. However, through combined recourse to a historical sociology of actions and methodological individualism, certain authors fail to address sufficiently the theoretical quandary raised by the relationship between culturally constituted subject-positions (agency) and socio-economic or political organizations (structure). The problem of positing ‘culture’ as an autonomous—and hence potentially overdetermining-category remains. Further-more, while taking issue with the ‘disenchantment’ reading of capitalist history, these critiques of standard approaches to local capitalisms in terms of their correspondence to the founding model of Western capitalism ignore recent, critical reappraisals of the narrative of the very history of capitalism in the West. Increased attention to historical regimes of value and truth, as opposed to culturally inspired complexes of meaning, redirects analysis to the question of how power is involved in the construction of efficacious historical referents.

Résumé
Du capitalisme culturel. — Dans cet article les trois ouvrages analysés offrent, chacun à sa manière, une critique aiguë du capitalisme en termes de catégorie universelle. À travers des études de cas, les auteurs remettent en question les conceptions qui font de l'histoire du capitalisme à la fois une entreprise globalisante du monde et un processus d'intégration inéluctable, dans une modernité englobante, des différentes communautés traditionnelles. Cependant, bien que certains auteurs aient conjointement recours à une sociologie historique de l'action et à l'individualisme méthodologique, ils ne parviennent pas à résoudre la contradiction entre une approche fondée sur le mode d'agencement culturel de positions occupées par des sujets (« agency ») et une démarche reposant sur un principe d'organisation socio-économique ou politique (« structure »). Dans cette perspective, le problème de la définition de la culture en tant que sphère autonome, et donc potentiellement déterminante, reste en effet posé. En outre, bien que tenant compte des interprétations de l'histoire du capitalisme en termes de « désenchantement du monde », ces auteurs, critiques à l'égard de la thèse de l'universalité du capitalisme occidental, laissent néanmoins de côté les tentatives visant à réévaluer la pertinence du récit fondateur de ce système. Porter davantage d'attention au régime historique de valeur et de vérité plutôt qu'au système de sens à fondement culturel réoriente l'analyse vers la question de savoir comment le pouvoir est impliqué dans la construction de référents historiques efficaces.
Queries on Cultural Capitalism*

The end of the Cold War has provoked a scramble within most disciplines of the social sciences to locate and interpret the moving forces of ‘globalization’, understood, for the most part, to be grounded in the extension of capitalism to a world scale. The common problématique has been defined in terms of the disjuncture between national territories or spheres of authority and supranational, transnational, regional and subregional agents of social and economic exchange and regulation, as well as cultural production (examples include firms, international banks, religious communities, diasporas). However, the various disciplines take on the task in many manners: international relations theorists and political economists have turned their sites on the inter- or multinationalization of non-state entities (capital and labor markets, credit and finance structures); scholars working from within the ‘cultural studies’ rubric examine the logics of late capitalism and deterritorialization, honing in on transformations related to the effects of novel media, the circulation of various commodity forms, the dissemination and reappropriation of cultural idioms and signifying repertoires associated with emergent communities and public spheres; and anthropologists have moved from studies postulating seemingly localized, time-bound communities to apprehending how such communities are constituted in transnational flows and how those flows affect localized experience, thus affirming that ‘the truth of experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place’ (Jameson 1988: 351).

This flurry of intellectual activity has generated much interesting work on the logics of globalization. And yet conclusions about the homogenizing effects of globalization are constantly threatened by daily headlines testifying to complicated and often violent processes of segmentation, factionalization, and fragmentation. These movements are said to circumvent and undermine the nation-state form, and yet the institutionalization of their diverse effects is not yet clearly discernible at the international level. Hence while the above-described literature does attempt to account for the pervasive nature of these counter tendencies, thus further problematizing the homogenization reading of


internationalization, there is little consensus as to the nature of these contradictory processes. What is needed, it seems, are serious, detailed empirical studies documenting the various scenarios being produced out of these tensions, leading to the reconfiguration of economic, cultural and political spaces.

Three recent responses to such an endeavor are Jean-Pierre Warnier’s \textit{L’esprit d’entreprise au Cameroun}; the volume edited by Peter Geschiere and Piet Konings entitled \textit{Itinéraires d’accumulation au Cameroun},\textsuperscript{1} and Jean-François Bayart’s edited volume, \textit{La réinvention du capitalisme}. These works are bold initiatives in the examination of some of the above-described effects of globalization through empirical studies of contemporary situations. The first two are circumscribed by the (not unproblematic) state of Cameroon; the latter includes studies from various regions (India, Iran, Cameroon, China, Central Asia, Russia). All three volumes offer a critique of analyses (and hence representations) of capitalism as a universal category, thus taking issue with the homogenization narrative of globalization and capitalist history, and the concomitant assertion of the inevitability of the unilinear integration of local, ‘tradition’-bound communities into the global space-time of modernity. By assuming the now generally accepted proposition that ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ are not mutually exclusive categories, these studies demonstrate that social forces (often assumed to be manifestations of ‘tradition’) are not inimical to either the development of capitalism in certain local contexts or the integration of such localities into the global capitalist economy. They document regional experiences and inventions of capitalist accumulation and, above all, modernity. In this sense, they are inroads to a phenomenology of accumulation. From a sociology of action (à la Touraine), they account for trajectories of accumulation that do not replicate the experience of Western capitalist communities; emergent categories (e.g. labor) and forms of mediation (e.g. money) essential to the recent history of capitalism; and the structuring of the experience of capitalism and modernity by, for instance, extant semantic fields, historical identities, political logics, and historical modes of legitimation.

Warnier’s \textit{L’esprit d’entreprise au Cameroun} is an inquiry into the ‘invention of African entreprise’. His study pertains, in fact, to the Bamileke of Western Cameroon, who are well-known for their propensity for economic accumulation. Warnier examines the transformation of the Bamileke entrepreneurial ‘ethos’ in its passage from one generation to another. He demonstrates that the Bamileke ‘entrepreneurial logic’ involves certain practices such as savings (hence underconsumption and an ethic of austerity), investment (hence regularity of revenues), independence from the state (no salaried positions), migration strategies and high level of professional mobility. These practices are explained according to two registers: the ‘sociological’, pertaining to individual migrations and career paths, and the ‘cultural’, which relates to Bamileke mercantile traditions and the ‘notability ethos’ (‘ethos de la notabilité’). This ethos is essential to the reproduction of Bamileke strategies of accumulation; it is the mode of legitimation of accumulation and of social and generational inequalities.

Ultimately, Bamileke society is said to be defined by an economy of retention while the economies of Cameroonian forest societies are based on logics of

\textsuperscript{1} In a cosmopolitan and thoroughly European spirit, this is a bilingual edition, the English title being \textit{Pathways to Accumulation in Cameroon}.\nocite{Warnier1995}
consumption (Warnier, p. 112). And while one might question the opposition between retention and consumption—inquiring instead as to how tendencies toward one practice or another are produced in any given historical conjuncture—Warnier, in keeping with a sociology of action, posits the entrepreneur as agent and hence attempts to account for the latter’s capacity to determine a specific trajectory in the context of given cultural repertoires and historical possibilities (see *ibid.*, chap. 2). He turns, then, to the economy of desire that underpins values of austerity and savings (chap. 4). Warnier establishes a correspondence between economic austerity and sexual austerity, and goes on to distinguish austerity from an ‘economy of reproduction’. This distinction is what differentiates celibate juniors—who must abstain (sexually and with respect to consumption) in order to accumulate—from polygamous notables. The Bamileke notable, or head of the family, has the power to engender via the practice of retention; the specificity of the Bamileke notion of retention is, according to Warnier, most aptly signified by the fact that carved recipients are representations of masculinity (cf. *ibid.*, cover photo and p. 129).

Warnier thus demonstrates how idioms, metaphors and representations essential to the production and regulation of long standing socio-political organizations are wholly functional in and as part of modernity. The ways in which such idioms or metaphors are mobilized and reappropriated gives insight into the process of the domestication of modernity (cf. pp. 157-162). Here, Warnier’s claim that, in Cameroon, ‘the domestication of imported modernity’ involves its ‘autonomization’ from its sources (p. 165) brings us back to Jameson’s comment on the disjuncture between the truth of localized experience and the sources of the production of that truth. While not denying the autonomous nature of expressions of Cameroonian modernity, the very process of autonomization must be problematized: how do transformations at the source (e.g. the metropole, the externally-defined consumer market) affect the production of Cameroonian modernity? And, more importantly, how are locally defined meanings of modernity circulated in a larger regional sense, eventually attaining some ‘exchange value’ in the global market of (post)modern forms? In any case, these questions might have relevance to Warnier’s conclusion that the production of inequalities in Bamileke society, as structured and legitimated in the institution of the chiefdom and its ‘notability ethos’, has been altered due to the notables’ inability to maintain pretensions to a ‘monopoly over the allocation of resources and the penalties and ultimate uses of occult forces’ (*ibid.*, p. 217). This presupposes transformations in modes of legitimation and raises the question of the younger generation’s subversion of extant regimes of truth—an operation entailing alternative sources of truth value. However, having said that, Warnier’s insistence on the durability of the Bamileke hierarchy (subversion leading to its ‘reinvention’ not elimination) does attest to its ‘dynamism’ in ‘the face of a changing market’, and confirms that modernity is as much a ‘consequence of the maintenance of old inequalities’ (p. 199) as their elimination.

This latter point is neatly underscored in the edited volume by Geschiere and Konings. This collection of empirical studies of specific modes of accumulation and the consequent production of new inequalities in Cameroon is an exploration of the ways in which preexisting modes articulate with emergent ones. These articles respond to hegemonic representations of the supposedly natural quality of exchange and accumulation (and hence of capitalism as a uni-
versal category). In contrast to the view that the market and civil society exist as autonomous institutions characterized by their own causal laws and modes of organization, the historical and mutual constitution of the state and the market, or the state and society, is investigated through an approach to such institutions 'from below'. Thus the 'subterranean' power of the state in society and the power of society to subsume the state (i.e. via redistribution) are explored in a resolute effort to overcome state-society (and state-market) dichotomies. This is especially pertinent since much recent scholarship and policy-making rests on such an assumption, leading to claims that accumulation taking place 'outside' the state is equivalent to nascent capitalism and that social forces coalescing 'outside' the state are the bases for 'market democracy'. The two sets of questions that explicitly inform the case studies presented in the book are thus: 1) 'What is the exact relation between state and accumulation? Do modes of accumulation really take place “outside” the state or do they constitute informal or even illegal excrescences of the state?' and 2) 'Which regional variations occur in the grafting of new forms of accumulation onto existing patterns of organization?' (Geschiere & Konings, p. 27).

The idea of regional variations places emphasis on indigenous forms of accumulation and the diverse ways in which resultant social inequalities are legitimated or contested by local communities and sub-state sites of power. It also allows for an account of various trajectories within nation-state boundaries, thus furthering a critique of the assumption that such frontiers should circumscribe our units or fields of analysis. The notion of 'straddling'—which explains success in the formal and informal economies in terms of an agent’s ability to maintain footholds in both the public and private sectors, the former being essential to access, mobility and achievement in the latter—is taken as a point of departure since it illuminates the myriad possibilities for varying modes of accumulation. These strategies are, however, structured by different local social and political fields, leading, in turn, to a historical scheme of regional variations (cf. ibid., pp. 13-15).

The straddling techniques pursued by agents in their relations to the public and private sectors are examined with respect to Bamileke entrepreneurs of Western Cameroon (Miaffo & Warnier, pp. 33-69) and the anglophone community of Bamenda (Rowlands, pp. 71-97). The former case confirms the straddling rule. However, the generalized opinion that contemporary African economies are defined by the unproductive investment of resources (i.e., investment in social networks to maintain social or status positions) is challenged by the example of Bamileke merchants who, from such positions, invest productively in the plantation economy and, more recently, small industries. In the second case, the straddling rule has been redefined over time. The historical exclusion of Anglophones from the state resulted in the construction of networks and associations based on idioms of kin and ethnicity that crosscut the state/society opposition; in circumventing the state for finance, anglophone

2. For a critique of these views, cf. J. Rohman 1990.
entrepreneurs moved into commercial manufacturing by utilizing expatriate technical support and personal ties to foreign business firms. More recently, the anglophone distinction of exclusion from and avoidance of the state has been transformed, as credit supplies depend increasingly on access to government salaries as security. Hence a second generation of entrepreneurs now pursue straddling techniques, confirming the impact of structural changes at the national and international levels (e.g., debt-credit flows) on localized regimes of accumulation.

Straddling also constitutes a mode of accumulation in-and-of-itself; changes in the forms of rents controlled by the state thus potentially transform bases of capital and wealth. In a study of the politics of oil rents, Jua (in *ibid.*, pp. 131-159) investigates struggles centered about the postcolonial state and shows how, because the state is the primary locus for upward mobility, straddling leads to its privatization. The nature of the regime of accumulation defined by the state has, however, impeded the establishment of its relative autonomy vis-à-vis the international community via petrol rents (Vallée, pp. 161-185). Thus the turn, in the late 1980s, to debt financing implied a change in economic regime. However, since the public sector remained the primary site of privatization, the private appropriation of public resources was not significantly modified by a change in the basis for enrichment. Debt derived from international and public-works markets has replaced public entreprise as the locus of capital accrual. By taking into account the state as a matrix of accumulation and the ways in which strategies of wealth creation are structured by power relations, these chapters indicate how the social and material foundations of the state defy the unproblematic teleology of capitalist development.

This teleology is further problematized in the articles attending to the dynamics of regional regimes of accumulation and, more specifically, the ways in which preexisting modes articulate with emergent ones. Hence leveling mechanisms that work against certain ways of amassing wealth and consequential stratification can in fact be refigured. Imperatives for redistribution operating within the family sphere are overcome by Bamileke entrepreneurs through novel savings strategies (Miaffo & Warnier). And kin and ethnic affiliations are perfectly functional for Bamenda capitalists in their construction of finance networks, defying the Weberian point that the development of modern capitalism depends on the transformation of substantive rationality and hence the logic of economic action (Rowlands in Geschiere & Konings, p. 71). This critique is reiterated by Geschiere and Fisiy in their assertion that ‘local beliefs are confirmed in spite of, or rather thanks to, modern changes’ (p. 112). Through regional comparisons of the relationship between sorcery and accumulation, they demonstrate the ambiguous nature of supposedly ‘traditional’ categories. Sorcery beliefs and practices can serve to articulate and represent the dangers inherent in new forms of wealth, thus delegitimizing new methods of amassing wealth and their attendant inequalities, or incite capital accrual—even becoming the expression of a ‘cult of accumulation’—hence legitimizing the production of new inequalities based on new forms of wealth and power. Ultimately, then, these regional variations are bound up in historical conjunctures (e.g., appearance of new forms of wealth) and yet their trajectories are dependent on the legitimating logics of local power structures.

Finally, the point that certain forms of seemingly unproductive activities are
not necessarily incommensurate with accumulation, and that the production of status through symbolic capital is likewise essential to capital accumulation in the stricter sense is addressed with respect to possibilities and imperatives for accumulation amongst Cameroonian women. Van Santen (in ibid., pp. 301-334) confirms that symbolic capital is productive according to certain registers of wealth and status in her assertion that 'status pays' (p. 325). She questions the opposition between economic profit and social status: Mafa women who convert to Islam enter into intense and costly exchanges of marriage gifts in order to affirm their status as Muslim women; and this status becomes, in turn, a privileged site of accumulation. Göheen (pp. 241-271) examines how the material wealth produced by women in Nso is transformed by men into symbolic capital; new matrimonial strategies inspire by changes in material conditions have not subverted configurations of power institutionalized by men. Likewise, Holte-dahl (pp. 273-300) considers the metamorphosis of the institution of marriage and its impact on social stratification as new forms of knowledge (Western education) interplay with those offered by familiar religious and ethnic communities. Evidently, changes in material conditions or forms of knowledge resulting from the impact of larger structures on localities leads to the reconfiguration, but not demise, of long standing institutions.

La réinvention du capitalisme, edited by J.-F. Bayart, is an exploration of this latter theme from the perspectives of many geographical sites and disciplinary vantage points. As Bayart states, alongside capitalist penetration and the integration of local economies into the global capitalist economy, one witnesses 'the reproduction of forms of accumulation and exploitation that exhibit ambiguous relationships to capitalism' (p. 11). The 'reinvention of capitalism' refers, in fact, to Weber's concerns with the sources of the 'irrational' element in the capitalist spirit (e.g. dedication to work). Allusions to Castoriadis are, however, evident in the assertion that the 'transplant of capitalism to societies outside the West is also a part of an imaginary ('imaginaire'), and of its social practices' (p. 20). The problem of 'culture' in socioeconomic transformation is apprehended from this particular perspective. It is not a given, static category—and hence either a wellspring or impediment to economic transformation—but is rather constantly invented through mutual processes of exclusion, interaction and inclusion between communities in the historical long term ('longue durée'). The paradox of the rationalization process lies, then, in the invention of modernity: that is, 'the universalization of the “capitalist mode of thought” does not really amount to a loss of sense in social relationships, a “disenchanted world”...’ (Bayart, p. 249).

Thus, in consonance with the two works reviewed above, this volume explores the institutionalization of a capitalist economy via ‘traditional’ modes of action. Obligations of reciprocity have endured modifications in the organization of production brought on by the reform process in China; in fact, the sets of common interests that are dramatized by such practices are affirmed in this emerging context (Rocca, pp. 47-72). The monetization of rites involving kinship relations in Cameroon has produced a veritable ‘kinship market’; indeed, the intensification of monetized relations during the colonial period relied on preexisting networks of kin relations and alliances that were central to the extension of one's commercial network (Geschiere in Bayart, pp. 87-113). The re-
between Central Asian peasants and the Soviet state) in terms of Islam has resulted in its autonomization from its original ideological cadre, allowing this institution to persist while being transformed (Roy, pp. 73-86). Likewise, the practice of the gift in Teheran (Adelkhah, pp. 117-144) and in India (Jaffrelot, pp. 145-172) are fully functional aspects of economic modernity. Furthermore, Jaffrelot shows how public acts of charity—which are both religious and civic practices—are integral to the entrepreneurial logics of Hindu merchants in India.

Many of the contributors to this volume analyze not only the mechanisms of articulation between old and new forms, but also the legitimation of private accumulation and capitalist relations in areas undergoing dramatic shifts in their orientation to the capitalist world economy. Rocca finds that ‘social conflict within local communities now crystallizes around new possibilities for accumulation’ (p. 67). Different sectors of the society (e.g. bureaucrats vs citizens) have divergent views on new ways of amassing wealth and economic success. Thus, for example, while accumulation involving the mobilization of *guanxi* relations is generally condemned, ‘success via talent’ is now acceptable. However, Rocca concludes that, ‘even if one discerns new forms of legitimation of social success centered around the notion of personal talent, only accumulation for redistribution seems to be accepted by the local population as a whole’ (p. 70). One can conclude that the transformative power of ancient institutions means that they are in no way inimical to the intensification of capitalist relations, but the modes of legitimating reconfigured social relationships are indicative of the specificity of any one historical form of capitalism being institutionalized today.

And while this process may result in the institutionalization of new inequalities, new forms of accumulation and economic relations may be legitimated to the extent that they are appropriated by and bolster old patterns of social stratification. In Eastern Cameroon, the ‘penetration of money into the very heart of ritual practice’ (e.g. funeral rites) meant that new possibilities for enrichment were integrated into the very sites where social relations are negotiated. Those forms of organization were reinforced to the advantage of elders who controlled ritual practice, and the circulation and accumulation of women and prestige goods; their articulation with the emergent market was therefore accentuated (Geschiere in Bayart). The question of legitimation, it seems, is central to the direction of capitalist transformation. This is evident in the debates described by Rousselet (in *ibid.*, pp. 203-226) over the evolution of the contemporary Russian economy, which are centered on issues such as the ‘Russian tradition’, the ‘civilizing’ role of the West vs that of Russia itself, Asian vs European sources of Soviet identity, the Russian spiritual and economic renaissance, interpretations of ‘just and moral’ economic activity, etc. These are representations of Russian history and society. Those that become hegemonic will determine what types of relationships, inequalities and practices are considered proper, logical, reasonable and ‘natural’, and are thus institutionalized in the process of capitalist transformation, or not.

One way of apprehending that process is through analysis of categories of mediation between institutions and social relations. These can take on many

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5. *Guanxi*: A network of parental, professional and social relations.
forms, such as money (Geschiere); finance, credit and debt structures (Warnier in *ibid.*, pp. 175-201), instances in which local communities are linked to the state (Roy, pp. 73-86) and economic identities. The latter operate as schemes of action, often contributing to the institutionalization of new economic activities via the legitimizing effects of historical registers of appropriate behavior. Hence with the breakdown of the planned economy and the disorganization of the state, kolkhoz notables have become essential economic agents; their (vs the apparatchiks') enrichment and recent commercial endeavors are understood and accepted with reference to the historical identity of notables constructed in Muslim practice and kolkhoz solidarity (Roy). The mediators of modernity in Iran constantly reactualize ‘a historical ethic in the contemporary economic context’ (Adelkhah, p. 127). Here, the economic identity of the javânmand is a historical referent whose ethical lexicon includes representations of generosity, gift-giving, sacrifice, sociability and social distinction—all of which circumscribe a field of appropriate actions and relations. Likewise, the identity of the entrepreneur in the Russian social imaginary is produced out of many ‘cultural substrata’ of Russian and non-Russian origin (Rousselet).

In sum, the rich and detailed case studies presented in the three volumes reviewed here document ‘alternative’ forms of accumulation and capitalist economic organization through analysis of the ways in which such forms are being produced, practiced and legitimated in the contemporary world context. As noted above, the authors’ turn to a historical sociology of action and the privileging of the ‘meaning of action’ (‘sens de l’action’) is inspired by a rejection of the overdeterminism inherent in both structuralism and cultural reductionism. The latter—which rests on the presupposition that cultural invariants determine action—is a particularly tenacious mode of understanding the logics of contemporary communities in their relations to global capitalism. These studies offer a corrective to such interpretations by investigating how historical referents and cultural repertoires inform and circumscribe possibilities for action, or fields of action. This ultimately involves examination of culturally constituted subject-positions (agency) and socio-economic or political organizations (structure). Therefore, even though by ‘culture’ they imply a field of historically constituted constraints, these studies have not in fact transgressed the methodological and theoretical quandaries inherent in positing ‘culture’ as an autonomous—and hence potentially determining—category since they do not attempt to at least clarify their positioning with respect to the age-old structure-agency problem.

Cultural Stasis and Incoherent Action

The inconsistencies produced out of this ambivalence are manifest in many of the chapters of all three volumes. They stem essentially from the failure to

6. A javânmand is a young man who represents an ‘existential ethic’ or ‘style of life’ (p. 126).
7. This theoretical ‘problématique’ is most notably associated with the sociology of A. Giddens (1979); his structuration theory has been a great object of debate, its relationship to post-empiricist philosophy being of uncertain status.
problematize the coherent, intending subject. However, the more immediate issue of positing culture in terms of coherence (even while avoiding assumptions as to its static and ahistorical nature) is evident in the persistent use of notions such as an ‘economic ethos’, a ‘moral economy’ or ‘economy of affection’, and ‘the gift’. Rocca, for instance, refers to an economic ethos which he defines as an ‘economic mentality’ distinctive of the Chinese peasantry (p. 51). He brings Scott’s ‘moral economy’ (1976) to Weber’s understanding of the Chinese collective: as opposed to being based on the idea of profit-seeking for collective ends (Weber), the notion of gain is in fact secondary to the peasantry. Obligations of reciprocity (the basis of the moral economy) prevail to the extent that the ethic of reciprocity dominates the danwei, or work establishments. Tradition (reciprocity) is reinvented in the very site of modernity (the danwei). And yet this non-static appraisal of culture and change is based on a Scottian notion of ‘social order’, or what Rocca calls the ‘socialist moral economy’. Culture is, then, the basis for social order. This is clearly an argument for the coherence, and hence persistent nature, of culture; it raises the question of how ‘social order’ is itself produced in conflict, through the circumscribing of difference in cultural representations. Similarly, while Adelkhah examines how the ethic associated with the javânmand is actualized in history, she does not account for authorized voice: which segments of society produce hegemonic interpretations of this ethic? What are the sites for the production of alternative interpretations? And how are these alternatives marginalized or termed illegitimate and subversive? This is the incoherence in culture; and this politics of culture is what accounts for its non-static, transformative quality.

And just as notions of an ‘ethic’ or ‘moral economy’ are used to trace (often brilliantly) the ‘paradoxical assimilation of modernity’ by the socio-cultural logics of various local communities, Mauss’s idea of ‘the gift’ is likewise mobilized as a means to underscore the workings of ‘culture’ in the economy. Instead of being a simple object of exchange, the gift is here viewed as constituting a social relationship; it is a dramatization of a whole network of social relations, a signi-

8. This difficult problem will be taken up below.
9. It also fails to account for many longstanding critiques of Scott, most of which take issue with the reductionism inherent in the assertion that all fundamental notions of legitimacy and justice derive from a ‘subsistence ethic’ which is grounded in the supposed reciprocal nature of peasant social exchange.
10. Warnier’s quest for a Cameroonian economic ethos must respond to the same set of questions—especially if he is to avoid the fallacious determination of authenticity supposedly located in an autochthonous rationality or set of practices. See Warnier (in Bayart, pp. 175-201), Miaffo & Warnier (in Geschiere and Konings, pp. 33-69) as well as Warnier’s book reviewed here.
11. Mauss has been revived recently in both French and Anglophone literatures in a critique of utilitarian readings of economic life. A few paradigmatic examples include the work done by the Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociale (MAUSS) in La revue du MAUSS, and their volume, Ce que donner veut dire. Don et intérêt (1993), both published by the Éditions de la Découverte (Paris). See also A. Weiner (1976), M. Strathern (1988), and A. Appadurai, ed. (1986). Bourdieu (1977) has most forcefully demonstrated the logic of interested calculation involved in gift exchange, arguing for a less restrictive, more comparatively relevant definition of economic interest. He is not referred to by the authors reviewed here who take up this perspective.
And yet this purchase on the non-economic aspect of exchange is still guaranteed by underlying assumptions about the unified nature of culture. Positing the gift as a 'total social fact' risks a functionalist reading of exchange if one cannot clarify how the gift produces this moment: how does one account for the productive power of this social fact? Furthermore, as an act of signifying a social relationship or an identity, does it always affirm aesthetic and ethical grounds? Does the gift signify differently for different segments of society? This brings us back to 'social order': according to their interpretation, the gift, instead of dramatizing and inscribing difference, confirms cultural consistency. And yet the very affirmation of certain statuses and ethical principles in the signifying act of exchange (the gift) is a representation. Just as a 'shared ethos' is not necessarily shared (it is perhaps more often contested than agreed upon) or obligations of reciprocity grounded in a moral economy are not always confirmations of some 'real', objective reciprocal relationship, the gift might not always produce a sense of moral compulsion or reproduce the social relations it seeks to actualize. To the contrary, the perception that an ethos is shared, that relations are reciprocal, or that exchanges signify a set of ethical and aesthetic precepts is the effect of hegemonic representations of such relationships and exchanges. It seems, then, that a historical sociology of action that takes as its point of departure schemes of action produced according to certain historical referents must not only account for the fields of meaning that ground or orient potential action. The very production of social and cultural variation can only be apprehended by inquiring as to how the symbolic and signifying elements constituting any one imaginary field ('champ imaginaire') come to be privileged over others.12

This brings us back to the agency-structure problem insofar as an approach which presupposes the acting subject ('sujet agissant') in the context of historically produced fields of signifying action cannot address the problem of incoherent fields of meaning. Even if one accounts for how that subject (e.g., an economic agent) is produced within and on the basis of contending sets of meaning, the contradictions involved in any subject-position—which are due to the incoherence of cultural representations—are only resolved in the analyst's interpretative act. To be sure, a phenomenology of economic subjectivities is essential for understanding the historical constitution of economic agents and practices (Bayart, Warnier) and trajectories and strategies of accumulation (Geschicke & Konings). And yet without explicitly addressing the problem of presupposing a coherent, intending subject, the epistemological and methodological issues raised by attempts to assess (inter-)subjectively produced historical referents (i.e., 'meaning') cannot be avoided.13

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12. Implicit in this critique of 'culture' as a unified totality is the point that cultural inconsistencies and the production of divergent meanings stem from, precisely, its overdetermined nature, or the surplus of meaning that characterizes society and inter-subjectively produced meaning.

13. The critique of phenomenology can be found in the works of T. ADORNO (1982) and J. DERRIDA (1976; esp. 154-168) on Husserl. The various works of M. FOUCAULT also represent a definitive break with, among other things, phenomenology. The methodological implications of attempting to study meaning in culture are elucidated in R. DARNETTON's contribution to cultural studies (1984).
Thus we see, for example, that Warnier’s solution to the antimony between socio-economic and culturalist approaches leads to theoretical inconsistencies. His recourse is to methodological individualism practiced on the basis of a ‘métissage’ of these two modes of interpretation: a theory of action and a ‘theory of civilization as the ensemble of social facts inscribed in the “longue durée” and furnishing agents with frames for action’ (p. 250). His subtle rendering of specific economic practices in non-economic terms is informed by Bataille, Baudrillard and Lacan (‘the economy of desire as a principle of the economy “tout court”’, p. 157) and involves determining the relationships ensuing from the economy of desire in the domain of Bamileke sexuality and that in the domain of the economy itself. While the structural or morphological similarities of centralizing metaphors and signs are well demonstrated by Warnier, the determinants and forces that render these categories heterogeneous and discontinuous are occluded by an overly reified and abstract account by analogy.14 Furthermore, and more important for the argument at hand, simultaneous recourse to elements of Lacanian theory and methodological individualism creates theoretical confusion. Lacan’s postulate that the coherent subject is not an objective social ‘fact’ and his subsequent argument for the necessarily fragmented nature of the subject15 renders problematic the starting point for any form of methodological individualism as well as any phenomenology: that is, subjectivity.16 While Warnier does not raise the issue of ‘closure’ so dear to Lacan, he does examine the constitution of the ‘modernist fantasy’ and its incoherence in the context of Bamileke society (p. 193). But because he privileges action, and hence does not problematize subjectivity, he cannot inquire as to the constitution of the modernist subjectivity itself (and its incoherence). Here, reference to Foucault’s work underscores this problem (cf. ibid., p. 259). For Foucault, disciplinary practices and ‘gouvernementalités’ are productive as opposed to repressive techniques; they are integral to the production of certain historical

For commentary, see R. Wuthnow (1987: 60-64); L. Hunt (1989: 9-12); and the debate between Bourdieu, Chartier and Darnton (1985).

14. Warnier’s project is in fact highly reminiscent of J.-J. Goux (1990). Through analogous method, Goux seeks to determine the homologous articulations of all symbolic organizations that are related to the exchange of vital activities. For a critique of Goux, applied here to Warnier, refer to G. C. Spivak (1985).

15. Cf. J. Lacan (1966). Lacan’s challenge to notions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ (i.e., the closing off of uncertainty) and the idea of the ‘fragmented subject’ issues from the linguistic point that the ‘I’ is the least stable of signifiers. Lacan’s critique of Freud is based on a rejection of the reduction of desire to need, leading to the assertion that ‘identity’ or perceived ‘wholeness’ is to be understood at the level of language.

16. To be sure, to the extent that Lacan’s project involves a theory of subjectivity and the unconscious, ‘the subject’ is the starting point of his reflection. However, this subject is construed as the constitutive category of ideology; in insisting on the primacy of imaginary representation, the impossibility of the subject’s self-representation is produced in ideology. Accession to subjecthood occurs in the process of alienation and is never fully achieved. Hence my point that methodological individualism, which proceeds from an intending subject, and Lacanian theory are in some ways dissonant. On the relevance of Lacanian theory for sociopolitical analysis, see E. Bellamy 1993.
practices and subjects. In this sense, because they circumscribe the objects of their operation, one cannot presuppose an acting subject ('sujet agissant') as prior to discursive and regulatory fields. Hence there is a fundamental dissonance between a historical sociology of action and Foucault's methodology, contrary to Warnier's interpretation. To be sure, Foucault would reject an anthropology of the subject. But here one might insist that the constitution of the subject surely goes beyond the scope of the projects set out in the volumes under review. This is true. And yet, as argued above, their stated objective of resolving the tension between the 'cultural being' and the 'acting subject' requires problematizing the subject itself.

Histories of Capital

Ultimately though, these works are important contributions to the histories of capital. They further our understandings of how societies typically and almost solely apprehended in function of their lying outside the trajectory of Western historical capitalism are living fully 'modern' experiences. And 'modernity' involves myriad trajectories in the context of diverse historical imaginations. One wonders, however, as to what the authors mean by 'capitalism' and 'modernity'. Their resistance to the teleology involved in defining these categories prior to examination of their actualization in various historico-geographical contexts is well noted. However, if one refers to a 'reinvented' capitalism or 'alternative' paths to accumulation, questions arise as to the extent to which accumulation, commercial activity, monetization, etc., are manifestations of capitalist-type relations. More importantly, a serious critique of standard approaches to local capitalisms in terms of their correspondence to the founding model of Western capitalism would, it seems, take issue with the opposition between 'cultural reason' and 'modern economic rationality' as it pertains to the very narrative of the history of capital in the West itself. That is, while the authors question the disenchantment reading of capitalist history—the idea that rationalization leads to loss of meaning in social relations—the assertion that utilitarian culture is the distinctive mark of Western modernity is only implicitly countered in a few

18. Warnier seems to assert the contrary. See his discussion of these points on pp. 259-260.
19. Debates over the theoretical and historical viability of this opposition and the narrative of capitalism and modernity with respect to Western societies have been taking place in many domains. Select interventions most relevant to our discussion include S. TAMBIAH (1990), A. APPADURAI (1986), B. HERNSTEIN-SMITH (1988). J. HABERMAS's rewriting of historical materialism (1989) and consequent examination of the constitution of the 'public sphere'—the process by which public and institutionalized politics were dissociated from the private (or the sphere of, first, the economy and, later, the family) has inspired much criticism of the assumption that this process entailed the establishment of formal rationality as the pre- eminent standard.
20. As duly noted by Bayart, this is Weber's interpretation of rationalization in which the institutionalization of secular modern culture, or formal rationality, leads to the evacuation of the sacred, or substantive rationality, from the human world.
of the texts. Nowhere is there a serious appraisal of hegemonic representations of the history of Western capitalism in terms of rationalization, the institutionalization of instrumental rationality or the autonomization of the economy from the socio-cultural sphere. This is surprising since there is so much accomplished work on this question. Recent inquiries into the dichotomizing tendency of the epistemology of the Enlightenment—and hence representations of Western history and the nature of Western social relations—have blurred the bold line drawn between societies ‘before and after the Fall into commerce’. This is relevant to the works examined here to the extent that positing ‘alternative’ trajectories to capitalism and modernity implies that local histories are still inscribed in the teleology of the extension of capitalist history—they are delineated theoretically in relation to the same founding model. It also deadens the heuristic value of concepts such as the gift, the moral economy and an economic ethos. Here, Jameson’s commentary on the sources of the truth of experience is once again pertinent: instead of attempting to interpret the historical logics of capitalism and modernity on the basis of culturally inspired complexes of meaning, attention should be turned to historical regimes of value and truth grounded in differentiated local and global fields (inscribed by identities, capital, commodities, media, technologies . . .) that are the ultimate sources of knowledge for various communities. From the point of view of a critical

21. Bayart does so in his introduction (1993, pp. 9-43). However, he does not take issue with the process of rationality per se. From a resolutely Braudelian perspective, he considers rather the extent to which war and violent processes of appropriation and accumulation are vectors of social change and the extent to which they are essential to the global history of capitalism. P. Geschiere (in Bayart, p. 88) specifically takes issue with the idea of the autonomization of the market/economy as a mark of capitalism/modernity, insisting that this is based on ‘certain fundamental distinctions of Western thought’. On this point, see J.-J. Gislain (1987), A. Salsano (1987), and S. Guðmund (1986). From an entirely different perspective, Coussy also addresses this topic (in Bayart, pp. 227-248).

22. For one, the rewriting of the productivist reading of the logic of capitalism has a long history. It has resulted in the view that the dominant mode of social power is not necessarily that of political economy, or production, but resides rather in the value creating and regulating role of consumption. Cf. J. Baudrillard 1968, 1970, 1975, 1981. This essential groundwork has led to the rereading of the role of rationality in the capitalist history of the West. See D. Frisby 1986 and D. Kellner 1989. Refer also to the works cited in fn 12.

23. This point is made, amongst others, by B. Herrnstein-Smith 1988: 130-131. Part of her elaborate argument concerns the ways in which the delineation of separate ‘spheres of value’ (such as sacred/profane, nature/culture) yields ‘binarized reifications’ of ‘culture’ and ‘economy’. Her specific concerns with value, valuation, aesthetics and relativism are crucial to the contours of the debate over meaning and the study of culture. For an evaluation of Herrnstein-Smith and further discussion of these themes, see also S. Connor 1992.

24. This is the result of demonstrations that commodity exchange, gift exchange and barter can all be shown to be calculative in nature, since they involve some type of means-ends rationality (cf. Appadurai 1986) and that non-utilitarian value itself (i.e. symbolic or aesthetic) can be redescribed as a utility (cf. Herrnstein-Smith’s devastating review of Bataille, 1988: 126-128).

25. For a concise and penetrating view on this brief statement, see A. Appadurai 1990.
reappraisal of the narrative of the very history of capitalism in the West—and hence of the nature of modernity—we move then to the issue of how power is involved in the construction of efficacious historical referents, those which endure the 'longue durée' and derive their productive power from the inscription of contending narratives and forms of knowledge to negative spaces.

In keeping with this, Bayart notes in his comments on culture and the material effects of representations that 'all imaginaries ("imaginaires") are not equal' (p. 20). To be sure, as the case studies demonstrate, localities caught in the incorporating and marginalizing logics of globalization are fiercely debating the very category of 'modernity', with reference to its attendant signifiers, such as capitalism, the market, democracy, etc. This inspires questions about the logic of postcoloniality and the sources of authoritative voice, questions which are of an epistemological order. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states:26

'...The political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, democracy, socialism, even culturalism. In the historical frame of exploration, colonization, decolonization, what is being effectively reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of the production of which was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. They are thus being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept-metaphors for which no historically adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space..."'

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ABSTRACT

This is a review essay of three works which offer poignant critiques of analyses and representations of capitalism as a universal category. Through empirical case studies, the authors refine and even subvert the homogenization narrative of globalization and capitalist history, and the concomitant assertion of the inevitability of the unilinear integration of local ‘tradition’-bound communities into the global space-time of modernity. However, through combined recourse to a historical sociology of actions and methodological individualism, certain authors fail to address sufficiently the theoretical quandary raised by the relationship between culturally constituted subject-positions (agency) and socio-economic or political organizations (structure). The problem of positing ‘culture’ as an autonomous—and hence potentially overdetermining-category remains. Furthermore, while taking issue with the ‘disenchantment’ reading of capitalist history, these critiques of standard approaches to local capitalisms in terms of their correspondence to the founding model of Western capitalism ignore recent, critical reappraisals of the narrative of the very history of capitalism in the West. Increased attention to historical regimes of value and truth, as opposed to culturally inspired complexes of meaning, redirects analysis to the question of how power is involved in the construction of efficacious historical referents.

RÉSUMÉ

Du capitalisme culturel. — Dans cet article les trois ouvrages analysés offrent, chacun à sa manière, une critique aiguë du capitalisme en termes de catégorie universelle. À travers des études de cas, les auteurs remettent en question les conceptions qui font de l’histoire du capitalisme à la fois une entreprise globalisante du monde et un processus d’intégration inéluctable, dans une modernité englobante, des différentes communautés traditionnelles. Cependant, bien que certains auteurs aient conjointement recours à une sociologie historique de l’action et à l’individualisme méthodologique, ils ne parviennent pas à résoudre la contradiction entre une approche fondée sur le mode d’agencement culturel de positions occupées par des sujets (« agency ») et une démarche reposant sur un principe d’organisation socio-économique ou politique (« structure »). Dans cette perspective, le problème de la définition de la culture en tant que sphère autonome, et donc potentiellement déterminante, reste en effet posé. En outre, bien que tenant compte des interprétations de l’histoire du capitalisme en termes de « désenchantement du monde », ces auteurs, critiques à l’égard de la thèse de l’universalité du capitalisme occidental, laissent néanmoins de côté les tentatives visant à réévaluer la pertinence du récit fondateur de ce système. Porter davantage d’attention au régime historique de valeur et de vérité plutôt qu’au système de sens à fondement culturel réoriente l’analyse vers la question de savoir comment le pouvoir est impliqué dans la construction de référents historiques efficaces.

Key Words/Mots-clés: capitalism/capitalisme, culture/culture, Cameroon/Cameroun, India/Inde.