

## Introduction: ethnographic engagements with global elites

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## **Introduction: Ethnographic Engagements with Global Elites: Mutuality, Complicity & Critique**

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**Abstract:** Anthropological interest in critical studies of class, system and inequality has recently been revitalized. Most ethnographers have done this from “below, while studies of financial, political and other professional elites have tended to avoid the language of class, capital and inequality. This themed section draws together ethnographies of family wealth transfers, philanthropy, and private-sector development, to reflect upon the place of critique in the anthropology of elites. While disciplinary norms and ethics usually promote deferral to our research participants, the uncritical translation of these norms “upwards” to studies of elites raises concerns. We argue for a critical approach that does not seek political purity, nor attempt to “get the goods” on elites, but which makes explicit the politics involved in doing ethnography with elites.

**Keywords:** class, critique, ethnography, elites, ‘studying up’, postcritique

### **Anthropology’s return to political economy**

Thomas Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, for all the discussions of inequality that it has brought into the pages of the business press, has hardly escaped criticism from anthropologists and political economists. Laura Bear (2014), Stephen Gudeman (2014), and Anush Kapadia (2015) have all drawn attention to Piketty’s retreat from Marxian political economy, and his conflation of *capital* with quantitative measures of ‘wealth’. To Bear (2014:643), Piketty’s reliance on national statistics means that he fails to account for the “unsanctioned and unrecognized social relations that contribute to the accumulation of wealth in society”. Likewise, Kapadia (2015:510-11) notes that Piketty’s comparisons between today’s patterns of inequality and those of the *belle époque* commit the “sin of thinking that

two social structures that have similar statistical properties necessarily have similar social dynamics,” and fail to bring the “institutional structures of contemporary capitalism into view.”

But Piketty has also been praised for his attention to the conventionally anthropological domains of kinship and inheritance. For Piketty, the dilemma faced by Rastignac in Balzac’s (1835) *La Père Goriot* – marry an heiress about whom you care little (after disposing of her brother), or fastidiously work your way through law school and the judiciary to earn a comparative pittance – resonates today. Sylvia Yanagisako, whose ethnography of family firms in northern Italy had earlier explored the mutual constitution of kinship and capitalism (Yanagisako 2000), finds in Piketty an important insight into the “structure of inequality,” differentiating the unequal distribution of income from labor and the unequal distribution of inherited wealth (Yanagisako 2015:490). Despite his attempt to steer “as far clear of a class analysis as possible in a study of wealth inequality in capitalist societies,” Piketty has, it seems, driven a “nail in the coffin of theories positing the decline of the significance of kinship in ‘modern’ (read *capitalist*) society” (ibid.). That portion of rising levels of inequality which cannot be explained away through differential returns to labour and capital income may be accounted for in terms of kinship and inheritance – even if Piketty does not delve into the “intimate, affective, and gendered processes through which wealth becomes patrimony and patrimony becomes capital” (Yanagisako 2015:494; see Glucksberg, this issue; Sklair, this issue).

But all this *should* not be news to anthropology. In the periodic attempts that have been made to carve out a sub-field that might be called the anthropology of elites (Marcus 1983; Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima 2000a; Shore and Nugent 2002; Abbink and Salverda 2013), inheritance, succession and kinship have often been at the centre of elite studies (see especially Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima 2000b; Marcus 1983, 1989b, 2000). But instead of attending

to the co-generation of inheritance and inequality, attention has been paid to the “resonance of family name and identity” as the “most durable and valuable resource” in the reproduction of wealthy dynasties (Marcus 2000:26; but see Sklair, this issue). In the wake of Piketty, it is perhaps clearer than ever that ethnographies of kinship and inheritance which divorce themselves from political economic concerns about class and inequality are just as incomplete as macro-economic accounts of wealth inequalities that overlook the intimate, affective relations through which patrimony becomes wealth (Yanagisako 2015).

The anthropology of elites has been concerned with “studying and understanding [elites] from within, trying to chart the *cultural* dynamics and the *habitus* formation...that perpetuate their rule, dominance, or acceptance” (Salverda and Abbink 2013:2-3, emphasis added; also Shore 2002:5). But, the contributors to this Theme Section argue, it must *equally* be about the mutual constitution of elites and subalterns; something akin to what Erik Olin Wright (2005:23) has termed the “inverse interdependent welfare principle.” Otherwise, we risk “repeating the elite fantasy that their rising fortunes are not interdependent with the dire straits of the lower orders” (Toscano and Woodcock 2015:513; see Gilbert, this issue). As the contributors demonstrate, however, a critical ethnographic study of elites throws up a set of challenges. The well-rehearsed disciplinary ideal of ethnographic encounters suffused with mutuality (Pina-Cabral 2013; Sanjek 2014) does not necessarily sit well with a *critical* orientation towards the global inequalities that everyday intimacies and affective relations might generate when one’s ethnographic subjects belong to a globally mobile, wealthy, and politically influential demographic.

Indeed, in recent decades, there has been something of a turn *away* from critique in anthropology and neighbouring disciplines. Rather than confronting the fact that the generation of global inequalities has, at its core, an intimate network of human relations (Bear et al. 2015),

anthropologists and those in neighbouring disciplines have begun to present a turn toward critique as an *anti-ethnographic* move, that *curtails* one's ability to function properly as an ethnographer or produce sensitive, rich ethnographic work (see below). It is this postcritical turn, most visible in anthropological work with groups that might be considered 'elite', that we and the contributors to this Theme Section wish to confront.

### *Aims of the Theme Section*

Rather than choosing between a distanced, critical political economic perspective on elites, and an intimate ethnographic approach which whisks political economy out of site, the contributors to this issue engage with ethical, political and analytical challenges posed by *studying both critically and ethnographically* in global elite settings. These settings include the 'Alpha Territories' of London where wealthy families reproduce themselves and their capital through highly gendered forms of labour (Glucksberg); the family homes of a wealthy Brazilian family concerned with reproducing themselves as 'socially responsible' industrialists (Sklair); and the private-sector development initiatives that emerge in the encounters between development officials based in London, and factory-owners based in Dhaka (Gilbert).

The first aim of this Theme Section is to provide an anthropological response to the recent revival of sociological (e.g. Savage 2015) interest in global elites whose occupation of "the most influential positions or roles in the important spheres of social life" (Shore 2002:4) is increasingly structured by the *wealth, mobility* and *enclaving* that allows them to divorce themselves from the constraints of public institutions (Davies 2016), even while they may exercise power through them. The Theme Section contributes to the still nascent *anthropology* of elites (see Salverda and Abbink 2013:8), which has recently begun to move away from questions of recruitment and succession (Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima 2000; Shore

2002:13) to examine the processes of elite *formation* among privileged professional groups (Pirie and Rogers 2013), and newly mobile, transnational corporate and financial classes (Bourgouin 2013).

A second aim for this collection is to address the lack of attention to class-based inequalities in existing anthropological studies of “elites” (cf. Savage and Williams 2008). The rise of ethnographic studies of financial and corporate ‘elites’ has often been accompanied by a vociferous rejection of the language of class or capital (e.g. Barry and Slater 2002). This is perhaps a consequence of sociologists concerned with financial expertise and the minutiae of socio-technical *agencements* working in “the shadow of older Marxist frameworks that have traditionally ignored or belittled these [financial] complexities and reduced them to merely the contingent, superstructural ephemera of the ‘real’ economic base” (Haiven 2014: 24). And yet, just as the expertise of financial and policy elites is always animated by charismatic, racialized, gendered, or classed projects (Bear et al. 2015), it is also implicated in the further generation of inequalities (see Gilbert, this issue).

As Don Kalb (2015:14-19) has argued in the recently published *Anthropologies of class* (Carrier and Kalb 2015), “extraction and exploitation may well, in the famous ‘last instance’ depend on surplus labor in production,” but studying class anthropologically demands a more open terminology and analytical frame. For Carrier (2015: 38), studying class anthropologically involves paying attention to those situations where the relations that people depend upon in order to improve their lives are the very same relations that hinder and obstruct those projects of improvement (see also Glucksberg, this issue). Indeed, we refer in this Theme Section to the ethnography of “global elites” not to signal a retreat from the language of class, exploitation, and into the language of privilege, distinction and advantage. Rather, it is to reflect the open-ended ethnographic projects from which the articles assembled here arise: we did not

set out to fit our ethnography into a pre-packaged language of class. Instead, we found that fieldwork with elites who - in Shore's (2000) terms - occupy the most influential positions or roles in social life, threw up unavoidable concerns about exploitation, inequality and the inverse interdependent welfare principle that the postcritical sensibilities of existing work on global elites (broadly conceived) seem to whisk out of sight.

But just as the study of *class* in sociology has been largely divorced from the study of *elites*, so too in anthropology has the recent return to the study of class, spearheaded by Carrier and Kalb (2015), by and large focused on what might once have been termed the working class – notwithstanding some passing references to the business class (Kalb 2015:18) and the transnational capitalist class (Neveling 2015:167). Similarly, Stryker and Gonzalez's (2014) efforts to resuscitate Laura Nader's (1972) project of “studying up” through “vertical slices” of society – such that, for instance, the organizational culture of an insurance firm could be causally related to residence patterns, credit access and life chances in starkly divided urban areas – have largely consisted of studying “down” *ethnographically* and projecting the critical anthropological imagination “upwards” (although see Ou 2014).

At the same time, it is more common than ever for anthropologists to carry out long term ethnographic work *inside* financial institutions (Riles 2011a), central banks (Holmes 2013), the World Bank (Mosse 2011), public-private development partnerships (Guyer 2011), diplomatic corps (Neuman 2012), and even the World Trade Organization (Deeb and Marcus 2011). With few exceptions, this work has either avoided or explicitly rejected class- and inequality-based analyses of these elite professional and political domains, focusing instead on the personal (see Harrison 2013) and technical or expertise-based aspects of elite experience. It is, however, these personal and technical capacities that may be translated into income inequalities (and

even inequalities inherited wealth), setting corporate and financial elites apart from those less mobile, wealthy or insulated from precarity.

It has often been noted that conventional ethnographic methods contingent on “being there” are troubled by studying elite cultures and contexts (Shore 2002:11). Cris Shore (2011:173) has identified a need for “rethinking the relationship between fieldwork and the generation of anthropological data” when attempting to study policy and military elites, and Don Kalb (2015:18) has noted that powerful business elites are “hard to capture by ethnographic tools, which means that it is necessary to complement them with methods derived from history, in particular world history, and journalism, as Eric Wolf knew well.” But what we hope to highlight here is that there is an increasing number of ethnographers who have carried out fieldwork in elite settings. The articles in this Theme Section shows that empirical, ethnographic work on wealthy elites often sets in motion inquiries that invite or necessitate attention to the maintenance and perpetuation of inequalities, and so to capital as a *relation*, rather than the mere hoarding of wealth. Yet the political, ethical and analytical implications of this state of affairs has largely gone unremarked upon since, as we noted above, there has developed something of a division of labour between those who engage with class analysis as they “study down while looking up” and those who work ethnographically in elite contexts but reject the language of class, inequality, or even critique (see below). This is not to say, of course, that an anthropological analysis of class-based exploitation can be rooted in ethnographic work carried out in elite settings alone. The accounts of ethnographers working with those whose welfare is in a *direct* and inversely interdependent relation with the elites we write about must also be drawn into our analysis (see Gilbert, this issue).

This brings us to the final and central aim of the Theme Section: to examine the necessary and possible relationship between *ethnographic* work with elites and *critical* analysis of the way

that elite projects of social reproduction – the generation of affective and intimate connections, and the exercising of professional capacities – translate into unequal distributions of wealth, power, stability and mobility. Our principal concern lies with interrogating what Lisette Josephides (2015a, 2015b) has recently termed the “requirements and obligations” of ethnographic research. For Josephides, *obligations* accrue in the process of formulating and circulating ethnographic knowledge, since “empathy is constitutive of anthropological knowledge, being essential to knowing the other,” and “the experience of fieldwork forces the ethnographer into relations of dependence which displace preconceived differences of status and power” (Josephides 2015b:55). Knowledge itself, however, due to disciplinary and other formal conventions, imposes certain *requirements* on ethnographic writing, and as such there is always a risk of ‘betrayal’ (Josephides 2015a:3; see Mosse 2006). Fieldwork carried out alongside some of the most powerful or influential individuals in society may amplify, rather than entirely displace, preconceived differences of status and power. Where they do not, this may have more to do with our *own* differential incorporation into a variety of elite settings.

In this vein, James Carrier (2016) draws a distinction between “empathy” and “sympathy” in the fieldwork encounter. Carrier defines empathy as the “core of interpretative understanding” and argues that this sentiment does not necessitate that the researcher likes or feels “an identity” with those they encounter in the field. Sympathy, however, “speaks of attachment or affection, a degree of identification with someone else” (Carrier 2016:51). Carrier identifies a shift from empathy to sympathy among anthropologists over recent decades, in which “there seems some tendency to elevate sympathy from a personal sentiment to something like a disciplinary expectation” (ibid). This shift in expectations regarding the way in which ethnographers are required to feel about the subjects of their research has made it harder, Carrier notes, to study and “think analytically” about both those of whom one approves *and* those of whom one does not.

Below, we seek to question the extent to which disciplinary norms such as these place particular requirements on the ethnographic knowledge that we produce through our engagements with global wealth elites, industrialist-philanthropists and corporate elites. Should anthropologists avoid being normative? Must our normative commitments only be voiced when they are aligned with the relationships we forge (and depend upon) during fieldwork? If our writing may betray those among whom we carry out research, can it not also betray *others* whose well-being and capacity for social reproduction is interdependent with that of our elite interlocutors?

### **Ethnography and/or Critique?**

We are particularly troubled firstly by the emergence of a particular set of explicitly anti-critical norms associated with elite and multi-sited anthropology of the contemporary, associated with George Marcus, Paul Rabinow and their colleagues; and secondly by the recent postcritical turn in anthropology that draws upon perspectives from actor-network theory (especially Latour 2004), as well as putative ethnographic ideals that have been enunciated particularly by proponents of the “ontological turn” (Kohn 2016) in anthropology. In some cases it appears that proponents of an anti- or postcritical ethnographic style have relied on “ethnographic engagement” as a substitute for the explicit articulation of political subjectivities that may be acquired before, during, or after fieldwork. In the process, diverse political commitments may be disguised as mere functions of the obligations and requirements of ethnographic knowledge production. What we hope to make clear in this Theme Section is that we are not arguing for a specific disciplinary politics from anthropologists (cf. Graeber 2002), but rather for the *making explicit* of diverse political positions and projects that shape ethnographic knowledge production and cannot reasonably be dissolved into an inherent “politics of ethnography.”

### ***Anthropologists Against Studying Up***

Prominent anti-critical anthropologists have sidelined attempts to generate critical or class-based reflections on fieldwork encounters as a vulgar – and ultimately *un-anthropological* – predilection. George Marcus has suggested that Laura Nader’s (1972) approach to “studying up” was too much a matter of “getting the ethnographic goods” on elites, a task to which anthropologists are not “temperamentally suited” (Marcus 1998:27-28). For Marcus, studies of elites ought not to identify “good” and “bad” guys, or impose modernist theories about “global histories of relations of domination” upon elites, but “pose the ambiguity and messiness of any moral position mapped onto social life across communities of difference” (ibid.).

As shown in reflective analysis on the recent history of anthropology (such as that provided by the volume edited by Carrier [2016] and in Nugent’s [2012] introduction to a collection of articles reprinted from the journal *Critique of Anthropology*) however, these pronouncements on the appropriate politics of ethnography are grounded in broader disciplinary shifts over the last half-century. Nugent charts the displacement of what he terms “Critical Anthropology (Mk I)”, a broad collection of work produced from the 1960s to 1980s, represented in particular by the articles reproduced in his edited volume (2012), and by Talal Asad’s (ed.) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) and Dell Hymes’ (ed.) *Reinventing Anthropology* (1972), which was situated in both political economic critique and an (interconnected) awareness of the particular global and historical relations which gave birth to the discipline and continued to inform it. From the mid-1980s, however, the ascendance of “New Critical Anthropology (Mk II)” served to undermine the political economic focus of this earlier work, based on three influencing trends: the Geertz-inspired “interpretive” approach to the anthropological study of culture; the poststructuralist turn (grounded in postmodernist and literary critiques of ethnographic writing) and the “emergence of a generic idiom of ‘globalization’ [in which] attempts to specify hierarchies of causality (e.g., ‘it is the economic in the last instance’) are

silenced by appeals to a rule-changing, one-world-market of neoliberal fantasy” (Nugent 2012: 15).

The claims made for the role of ethnography in this ascendant New Critical Anthropology (Mk II) have tended to overlook the fact that the work of critical anthropologists in the Mk I tradition was also grounded in “a fieldwork- (and archive-) based model in a direct lineage of tent-and-notebook anthropology” (Nugent 2012:18). In contemplating the questions we pose above, it is perhaps useful to remember that the critical anthropologists in the Mk I tradition were both fully committed to the ethnographic tradition, and rarely afraid of being normative.

For Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion and Tobias Rees (2008) however, Laura Nader’s essay on studying up and Dell Hymes’ (1972) *Reinventing Anthropology* - the pivotal “Critical Anthropology (Mk I)” volume in which it was contained - was a less sophisticated attempt at disciplinary critique and reform than the “more consequential moment” (Marcus in Rabinow et al. 2008:24) that which would follow with *Writing Culture*. It was, instead “an expression of an intention to render the discipline in the service of the right kind of politics” (Faubion in Rabinow et al. 2008:22). In the shift away from an earlier tradition of critique, as Maskovsky and Susser note, “adherents of political-economic critical anthropology are frequently treated as old-school radicals who somehow missed the 1980s memos on the fallacies of totalising narratives” (2016: 156).

Our concern in this themed section is *not* to declare back at anti-critical ethnographers of elites “I speak truth to power, while you are a pawn of neoliberal interests” (Felski 2015:186). Rather, we want to trouble the idea that the requirements and obligations of ethnographic writing require deference and the absence of critique, or that referring to class-like relations which reproduce inequality necessarily means moving further *away* from ethnographic understanding

in order to debunk or reveal the operation of a concealed structural power. Even more, we want to insist that the politics of ethnographers working in elite settings – however radical, liberal or conservative – are made *explicit*, and not disguised through a putatively shared politics of ethnographic engagement. It is, after all, not without consequence that New Right anthropologist Mark Dyal (2012) advises students that anthropology is an ideal discipline in which to “discuss [far right approaches to immigration] simply from the perspective of my subjects – which is what anthropology is about...There was nothing my committee could say, really, except to understand that it was my subjects’ position and not my own.”

Returning to Piketty (2014), Anush Kapadia has observed that the discipline has served as a “bizarro mirror image of the discipline of economics that is equally unhinged from economic reality and equally incentivized to produce the baroque and pass it off as knowledge” (Kapadia 2015:510). Both anthropologists and economists have spent the last few decades producing “show dogs rather than hunting dogs” (ibid.). Piketty – for his many anthropological shortcomings – wants to hunt. With few exceptions (e.g. Ho 2009), contemporary anthropologists of elites do not seem as concerned with the persistent *generation* and entrenchment of inequalities in wealth, power and mobility. When granted ethnographic access to the World Trade Organization, Holmes and Marcus take themselves as “being asked to participate within the ramifying imperatives of organizational experiments that seek to create an idiom through which a global regime of liberal trade gains articulation, a patois, so to speak, by which capitalism can speak reflexively” (Holmes and Marcus 2008:99).

But to posit this participatory relationship as the ideal contribution of ethnography in the contemporary era, and to ignore the political complicity between ethnographer and research participant inherent to such a relationship, appears problematic to say the least. Can we really accept that the obligations and requirements of ethnographic knowledge production are such

that protests against the 2009 Geneva Ministerial constitute nothing more than “a reminder for those of us who sojourn amid the contradictory scenes of placid authority and brute reality, and perhaps sometimes intervene in them, that our navigations across the scales of knowledge that organize contemporary life must continue” (Deeb and Marcus 2011:65)? What distance is there here between anthropologists of the WTO and “flat world” globalization guru Thomas Friedman who, as Angelique Haugerud (2005:107-113) observes, affirms the “power and ostensible rationality of the elite architects of the status quo,” and fails to grapple with the hard-felt implications of contemporary trade policy which, “as both theoretical edifice and societal vision deserves careful scrutiny rather than enshrinement”?

In this Theme Section, we seek to restate not only the possibility, but the value and necessity of work that is at once ethnographic, and open to the possibility of political economic critique that takes account of the institutions and relations through which class-like inequalities are reproduced. Given that there is often tension between ethnographic intimacy and the terms of political economic critique, the contributors have made their various normative orientations – as they both shaped or were shaped by fieldwork encounters – explicit. This in turn has required that certain disciplinary norms regarding the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork be confronted head on.

### *Anthropology’s Crisis of Critique*

In a recently published volume, *Anthropology after the crisis*, James Carrier (2016) suggests that some anthropologists share more than they might like to imagine with the neoclassical economists whose methodological and epistemological shortcomings have been much discussed since 2008. By eschewing concern with “order or system.” focusing on ethics and values rather than politics, and abandoning a concern with bases of common judgement,

“neoliberal” anthropologists have, Carrier charges, grown comfortable with a world in which “the most important thing is individuals and their personal orientations and values” (Carrier 2016:69). As another contributor to *Anthropology after the crisis* notes, the injunction to take one’s ethnographic subjects *seriously* is often adhered to with such vigour that the anthropologist “apologises for being critical” (Dullo 2016:133) of what she or he has observed in the field. And to be sure, ethnographic knowledge production, being grounded in *relationships*, certainly “calls for an ethical stance” (Josephides 2015a:1).

The ethnographer’s *ideal* ethical-epistemological stance has frequently been depicted as a matter of “yielding to the preoccupations of others” (Strathern 1999:6) in such a way that “imposes interlocutors’ concerns and interests upon the ethnographer” (Englund and Leach 2000:229). For Tim Ingold (2013:6), the ideal anthropology would “bring ways of knowing and feeling shaped through transformational engagements with people from around the world” towards the “essentially prospective task of helping to find a way into a future common to all of us.” This commitment to “building common worlds anew” is also to be found in Bruno Latour’s (2002) manifesto for a diplomatic anthropology, and in work carried out under the sign of the “ontological turn” (see Kohn 2016). Thus Holbraad et al. (2014) present *ontological* anthropology as a matter of attending to the “multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices, where politics becomes the non-skeptical elicitation of this manifold of potentials for *how things could be*”. Responding to this ontological turn, Luc Bessire and David Bond (2014) have identified a crisis of critique that accompanies its practitioners’ enthusiasm for non-skeptical, sympathetic encounters and the pursuit of a new common future, noting that “the turbulent present it holds at bay is something we would still like to know more about.” As much as the ontological turn is about fulfilling anthropology’s promise to “get our descriptions right” (Pedersen 2012), and “to employ a central concept and concern of Bruno Latour – to speak *about* them *to* them in ways they do not find offensive” (Viveiros de Castro 2015:15), it

is also about *rejecting critique* – understood as a claim that the social scientist-observer has a better access to reality (or the operation of concealed, systemic power) than those among whom she studies.

As we go on to outline below, we do not share this narrow reading of critique as merely a matter of “seeing through” or “debunking.” Indeed, it seems that many ontologists or ontographers also struggle to dispense with *some kind* of critical stance altogether. We might ask with Gad et al. (2015) what Pedersen (2012, cited in Gad et al. 2015:74) means when they claim an ontological analysis of far right movements would entail not critique but a “chipping” away; or why critique may be problematic to ontologists while “interference” in the ontologies they map and describe might be acceptable (see Woolgard and Lezaun 2013:326). To us, it seems that the tendency for postcritical scholars to equate “critique” with a redemptive act of unveiling concealed power by would-be sociologist-kings (see Felski 2015; Jensen 2014) may unwittingly serve interests other than that of getting closer to our ethnographic subjects’ meanings and practices (Fleissner 2017:115). It runs the risk of excising from view very real agonistic interdependencies that might be best described through a vocabulary of class, even when these interdependencies are made manifest through the understandings and practices we encounter through ethnographic fieldwork (see Gilbert, this issue).

What we set out to respond to in this issue is the *specific* problems that emerge when anthropologists pursue the fulfilment of anthropology’s promise via the privileging of sympathy and the rejection of critique despite (or even *because of*) their ethnographic engagements with global elites. What happens to the ethical-epistemological ideals of ethnography, defended so vigorously by proponents of the ontological turn, when fieldwork takes you *into* the very kinds of organizations that proponents of the ontological turn (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2015) frame as a threat to a multiplicity of modes of existence? Are the

rules of ethnographic engagement modified, or does one find the same apologies for criticality, the same injunction to yield to the preoccupations of your interlocutors? In the work of George Marcus and his colleagues – and among those ethnographers of finance, law and corporate organization who, like the proponents of the ontological turn, have drawn on Latour’s methodology without questioning its relation to his conservative political orientation (see Hornborg 2014:126) – it seems that anti-critical ideals are even more clearly articulated.

### *Anthropology After Critique?*

George Marcus’ long-term engagement with ethnographic method and the norms of doctoral inquiry in anthropology might have begun with an interest in how “canned visions of capitalism” (Marcus 1989:18) could be replaced with ethnographically-derived understandings of the contemporary world system (Marcus 1995). But it would not be long before his project was reoriented by a desire to be “free of the overdetermining moral economy and redemptive function of so much critical writing committed to describing life-worlds of resistance and opposition among those categorized as marginal” (Marcus 2001:2). Hence the turn to those who “share some of the same privileges and modest empowerments as those of us who interview and write about them” and are “fully inside and complicit with powerful institutional engines of change” (ibid.). It is immediately and forcefully apparent that Marcus’ anthropological ‘us’ is not all-inclusive. Not all of us are equipped or enabled to carry out ethnographic work within the World Trade Organization, in collaboration with its Director General, for instance (see Deeb and Marcus 2011). Nor can it reasonably be said that the ethnographic subjects discussed in this issue – global financial, wealth and corporate elites – are possessed only of ‘modest’ empowerments.

Marcus has insisted that he is "not a reactionary, an elitist, or even one who argues for elite studies as a counterbalance to the study of those who suffer" (Marcus 2008:12), and has instead explained his project as a matter of engaging with the "intellectually more active of ethnography's subjects, as interlocutors and epistemic partners in research" (Marcus 2012:435). But the extent to which these 'intellectually more active' partners *happen* to occupy "powerful institutional engines of change" hardly goes un-noticed – nor do the parallels between Marcus' anti-critical turn towards collaboration and partnership, and the parallel efforts that are made by corporate diplomats seeking to neutralize their critics (Gilbert 2015; Rajak 2011). And, just as proponents of the ontological turn sought to fulfil anthropology's promise by "getting their descriptions right" (Pedersen 2012) and speak to their subjects in ways that they do not find offensive (Viveiros de Castro 2015), Marcus has insisted that in collaboration with their "epistemic partners" anthropologists of the contemporary "are not needed to add 'critique,' moral injunction, or higher meaning to these accounts" (Holmes and Marcus 2008:84). Rather, they should move towards "a deferral to subjects' modes of knowing, a function to which ethnography has long aspired" (ibid.:82).

Annelise Riles, in her work on legal expertise in derivatives markets (Riles 2011a) and financial institutions that were "too big to fail" (Riles 2011b) has drawn on Latour (e.g. 2004) to reject explanations of law in terms of "social forces" (Riles 2011a:18) or "norms" (ibid.:33). For Riles, the anthropology of law is excessively addicted to a view of "the jural" as a "matter of rules and norms governing rights and obligations, in contrast to the flexible, empirical realities of economic relations" (Riles 2011b:34). Such an approach, Riles suggests, "assumes that the jural should be apprehended in a quite different modality, as a target of *critique rather than ethnography*." This notion, that critique and ethnography are incompatible or antagonistic modes of knowledge production is being made increasingly explicit by a new generation of organizational and business anthropologists. Writing in the *Journal of Business Anthropology*,

Ghislaine Gallenga (2016:10) insists that the point of an anthropology of business ethics is “neither to speak as a moralist nor to perform a moral evaluation of the corporate world.” Likewise, Léa Porée’s (2016:59) contribution to the same journal, addressing business ethics in the advertising industry, states that her aim is *not* to assess the “relevance” or “veracity” of moral values proclaimed by a particular firm’s staff: “This is not the role of the anthropologist, and it is probably pointless to try to discover if the aim of the ethics advocated is real or not.” But must we accept – with Riles, Marcus, Latour, contributors to the *Journal of Business Anthropology* and the proponents of ontological anthropology – that ethnography is necessarily *opposed* to critique? That critique lacks the sophistication required of the ethnographer? Making claims about the necessary opposition of ethnography and critique – or the extent to which critique may emerge not from positions taken at the *outset* but *from ethnographic encounters* – is tantamount to dispensing with what Michael Jackson (2009) terms “ethnographic judgement.” For Jackson, such judgment emerges not from “unreflective, a prioristic, moralistic *condemnation* of difference on the egocentric or ethnocentric grounds that alien beliefs or practices belong outside the pale of what is human,” but rather is a “way of doing justice to the multiplex and ambiguous character of human reality by regarding others *not as inhuman, but as ourselves in other circumstances*” (Jackson 2009:240).

### **For a Critical Ethnography of Elites**

The contributors to this volume approach the relation between critique and ethnography in different registers. While we are uncomfortable with the turn towards postcritical ethnography, our response is not to simply respond that critique is tied to inherently liberatory or progressive politics, nor to believe that critique reveals the “real” drivers of social behaviour which are otherwise disguised to non-critical social scientists (see Felski 2015: 15; also Keane 2014; Latour 2003; Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012). We fully appreciate the limits to the politics of

debunking and unveiling. Eve Sedgwick rightly notes the critical limits of unveiling where “forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than remain to be unveiled as a scandalous secret” (Sedgwick 2002:140).

Our point is rather that we find it troubling when post-critical anthropologists are willing to endorse normativity where that normativity emerges from a unifying “commitment to ethnographic engagement” (Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012:16). Here we arrive back at the assumption that *appropriately ethnographic knowledge emerges from ethnographic commitment*. How might we expand the understanding of ethnographic obligations and requirements to make room for nuanced ethnographic critique? What about ethnographers whose openness to transformative experience in the field has left them *more* critical of their interlocutors, not less? Can a critical stance not be committed to *a priori*, but emerge *through* ethnographic encounters? Critique is about far more than piercing the ideological veil and animating crudely-drawn class struggles. It is perfectly possible, as several contributors here demonstrate, to move between the “suspicion” of critique and the “faith” of ethnographic intimacy; to produce knowledge *by constantly moving between* the obligations of ethnographic encounter and the requirements of critique (Levitas 2013; Coleman 2015). For the contributors to this Theme Section, to be critical or engage with critique is not to indulge in a pessimistic or self-indulgent subordination of our ethnography to dated, pre-packaged perspectives on capitalism, development or the world system. It is rather to maintain an *openness* to the possibility that ethnographic fieldwork carried out in elite settings, among those holding the most influential positions in society, may put in motion inquiries that demand attention to inequality, exploitation, and agonistic interdependences that shape social reproduction. For us, to maintain an openness to critical language (and the language of class and capital), is to make space for the possibility of getting *closer* to our ethnographic subjects than might be possible where a language of class, capital and inequality is treated *a priori* with suspicion.

### *Overview of the contributions*

The contributors here all work towards a *critical ethnography* of elites, one that recognizes the importance of intimate ethnographic encounters for understanding the generation of global inequalities. Glucksberg begins the Theme Section by refracting recent work on the super-rich of London's 'Alpha Territories' through topics of longstanding anthropological concern: kinship and marriage, and the gendered division of labour within the household. The role that intimacy and caring labour plays in the reproduction of extreme inequality is brought out via Glucksberg's juxtaposition of "women's work" among the wives of super-rich financiers, and caring labour among the beauticians who help to reproduce "elite wives" as appropriately feminine. In both cases, gendered labour essential to social reproduction is rendered invisible and devalued, but as Glucksberg makes clear, the political-economic stakes are hardly comparable. Highly gendered caring labour is no more immune to analysis in terms of the "inverse interdependent welfare principle" (Wright 2005) than more "productive" economic activity.

The issues of elite succession and the preservation of wealth that are the focus of Glucksberg's article re-emerge in the contribution by Sklair, viewed now through the prism of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) within a Brazilian family business. Here, carefully crafted narratives on the history of family and firm appeal to claims of naturalised family values of social responsibility and benevolence. Encompassing obvious corporate objectives, these narratives also serve a more obfuscated role within delicate business succession processes, as control of the family firm is passed from second to third generation. In this latter context, claims to philanthropic family values emerge as key to attempts by the family to maintain control over the business on which the reproduction of its wealth and elite status depends. In this analysis, Sklair's critical ethnographic approach requires a conceptual movement between experiences

of mutuality common to researcher and elite research participants in the field, and a wider anthropological perspective on the different ways in which this business' activities have been perceived by the family and their firm's employees during labour disputes in the past.

Finally, Gilbert responds to the postcritical turn in the anthropology of development in the context of donor agencies and multilateral development institutions increasingly focusing on the private-sector as an engine of development. Gilbert examines the awkward alignment which emerges between aid-funded investment climate reform programmes designed to render Bangladesh an easier place for foreign investors to do business, nation branding and investment promotion exercises carried out by representatives of the state and brokers with an interest in promoting great capital flows to Bangladesh, and locally-placed factory-owning business elites. Rather than attempting to explain the actions of factory-owning elites and development professionals in terms of a concealed logic of capitalist development, Gilbert argues that when elites explicitly acknowledge the inverse interdependent welfare principle, and their accumulation of wealth at the extent of factory workers engaged in hazardous labour, it would in fact work against ethnographic understanding to *not* incorporate attention to class-based patterns of exploitation into one's analysis. Thinking through "complicity as a methodology" Gilbert highlights the potential for ethnographic mutuality to not only disable critique, but drive (sometimes oppositional) critique, by setting in motion inquiries which depart from our subjects' own recognition of their reliance on class-like antagonistic interdependencies.

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