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Article 3: Class, Complicity & Capitalist Ambition in Dhaka’s Elite Enclaves

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Abstract: This article draws on ethnographic work carried out in London and Dhaka as part of a multi-sited project exploring the production of investment opportunities for (predominantly British) companies in Bangladesh. Focusing on the Ready-Made Garment sector in the run up to, and wake of, the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse, I trace aid-funded attempts to improve Bangladesh’s investment climate, engagements with these initiatives by brokers seeking to “rebrand” Bangladesh as an investment destination, and by RMG factory-owning businesspeople based in Dhaka. Writing against the ‘postcritical turn’, I suggest that responding to the explicit recognition by business elites of their own complicity in the exploitation of garment workers provides an entry point for a critical account of private-sector development that enhances, not curtails, ethnographic understanding.

Keywords: Bangladesh, critique, complicity, development, investment climate, Rana Plaza

Introduction: postcritical anthropology and private-sector development

In 2015, the Bangladesh Board of Investment’s *Roadshow UK* was hosted in Canary Wharf, a private estate in the former Docklands that emerged as London’s second financial district during the 1990s. The event was presented as being “for investors and corporate heads who want to explore the opportunities of a frontier market like Bangladesh. The country offers untapped opportunities in a plethora of sectors which ensures handsome return, with smooth option for repatriation of equity and dividend.”¹ Bangladesh, attendees were assured, is *the* investment friendly regime in South Asia. With this roadshow, the Bangladesh Board of Investment was

reproducing a longstanding script according to which investment promotion agencies emphasize a “textbook outline of features known to be attractive to foreign export-oriented investors” (Klak and Myers 1997:137), albeit with a twist. The treatment of Bangladesh by the Board of Investment as a *frontier* market reflects an explicit effort on the part of the International Finance Corporation (the private sector arm of the World Bank Group) to “rebrand” developing nations as attractive locations for foreign investment since the 1990s.

In part this has worked by reinvigorating narratives about opportunities for “pioneers” to profit from “exotic” locations that animated extractive enterprise in the days of formal Empire (Sidaway and Pryke 2000:195; Lai 2006:632). Formally, however, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) now defines frontier markets as the poorest 82 countries supported by the World Bank’s International Development Association and make it clear that “investment climate” reform is a key concern as far as frontier markets are concerned. Of the many “rule of law” (Merry et al. 2015) and “competitiveness” (Davies 2014:108-147) indices now produced as decision-making tools for foreign direct investors (and yardsticks for policy-makers), the World Bank Group’s Doing Business rankings have done the most to forge, out of a tangle of legal and economic indicators, the “investment climate” as something tangible that can be visibly “enhanced” through legal reforms that make it easier to (amongst other things) start a company, dismiss workers, or enforce a contract (Perry-Kessaris 2011:402).

Analysts at JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs, meanwhile, have included Bangladesh as a member of the “Frontier Five” or “Next-11” respectively. These groupings of putative successors to the BRICS are assembled in part based on the size of the “economically active population”; in Bangladesh’s case, the youthful population and GDP growth driven by the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry are determined to be sufficient to offset the “political risk” associated with duopolistic party politics (e.g. Mowat and Gordon 2007:6). For the Dhaka-

based fund managers concerned with the national reputation or “brand” (see below) who reproduce the JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs classifications on their websites and promotional materials, what matters is not only the *size* and youthfulness of the workforce, but their cheap labour costs. Even in a less-than-ideal investment climate, when labour costs are so low there is profit to be made for those with the right speculative disposition (see Appadurai 2012).

The majority of the workers in the RMG sector, rendered by analysts of Bangladesh’s investment climate as cheap unit labour costs or members of an attractive economically active population, are young women - often rural-urban migrants from landless families. Their attempts to navigate new urban employment opportunities, persistent patriarchal family relations, workplace harassment and union formation have received considerable ethnographic attention – both before (Feldman 2009; Kabeer 1991; Kibria 1995; Rock 2003), and after, the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse (Chowdhury 2017a, 2017b; Dey and Pasak 2017). By comparison, the factory owners whose fortunes have been made through the emergence of Bangladesh’s multi-billion-dollar RMG export industry and the persistence of unsafe and exploitative working environments, have been largely absent from the ethnographic literature. This by no means reflects a lack of concern about class or elites in the anthropological literature on inequality and development in Bangladesh. The post-Independence political settlement in which political leaders in Dhaka entered into relationships of patronage with landowners (*jotedars*), able in turn to guarantee voter turnout amongst the landless workers who constitute their clientele has been well-documented (e.g. Adnan 2013; Lewis 2017); as has the emergence of alliances between elites in the NGO sector and transnational corporations accumulating rural land in the name of development (e.g. Ahasan and Gardner 2016; Gardner 2012; Rahman 1999).

The relative lack of attention given to factory-owners perhaps reflects a broader trend in anthropological work on business elites and development professionals: a reluctance to engage

with questions of class, exploitation and capitalism, *particularly* when this may lead to critical depictions of one's ethnographic subjects (see Gilbert and Sklair, this issue). The anthropologists of development who describe themselves as nonnormative (Mosse and Lewis 2006), postcritical (Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012; also Jensen 2014), and acritical (Jensen and Winthereik 2013; Winthereik and Jensen 2017), have drawn on Bruno Latour's writings (especially Latour 2004; see Jensen 2014:338; Mosse 2013:232) to develop a programme of research oriented towards tracing out the contingent and often surprising practices and alignment of interests that the translation of development policy into practice involves. This programme is set against older work in the anthropology of development which depicted development professionals as distant others "at once powerful and ignorant", and the development industry as the "kind of closed, bulletproof system beloved as a target of critique" (Jensen and Winthereik 2017:252-262). To treat development as the unfolding of a "concealed power" (Mosse and Lewis 2006:15; also Mosse 2013:229; Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012:7) vested in the uniform and un-reflexive interests of transnational corporations and development institutions is, for these authors, to abandon ethnographic sensitivity in favour of taking comfort in one's own pessimistic - if not ethnocentric - critical convictions (Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012:5-12; also Holbraad 2017). In short, it is argued that "[c]ritical engagement often seems to curtail understanding" (Yarrow 2008:441).

In this article, I examine the frictions generated when aid-funded investment climate reform programmes, nation branding exercises, and the interests of factory-owning elites were brought into awkward alignment, in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster. My analysis is set against frameworks which treats nation branding and investment promotion activities, investment climate reform, and the cooperation of local capitalists with

globalizing ambitions, as reflecting the operations of a more-or-less unified capitalist class in charge of the process of globalization (cf. Sklair 2000:73; Sklair and Struna 2013:748). To this extent, I share something of the methodological and analytical approach adopted by postcritical anthropologists of development: my aim is certainly to not to retreat from ethnography to invoke the operation of some concealed power, or depict investment promotion and investment climate reform as the operation of a closed, bulletproof system centred on the World Bank Group. However, if it is said by postcritical scholars that critique moves us further away from actors' own understandings and practices by invoking pre-determined sources of explanation (capitalism, empire, development), then it can also be argued that postcritical perspectives render political-economic relations based on exploitation and domination invisible, even when these are made manifest by actors' own narratives and practices.

Recent work on class (Kalb and Carrier 2015) and the generation of capitalist life projects (Bear et al. 2015) has made room for an examination of the uneven accumulation of wealth and exploitation of labour that does not reduce the study of social reproduction within a configuration of antagonistic interdependence merely to a language of class "position" or "system" (Kalb 2015:14-17). A desire to reject the language of class or exploitation wholesale because of a tendency on the part of *some* authors to subordinate ethnographic description to pre-packaged models of capitalism (or use the capitalist world system as the "context" through which ethnographic findings can be rendered sensible) does make a certain amount of sense (see Marcus 1989). But - as is the case here - when factory-owners in Dhaka make it explicit that their own life projects depend upon exploitation of the cheap unit labour costs which make Bangladesh such an attractive "frontier" market, it seems both reasonable and necessary that their reflections should be granted the capacity to "put in motion" (Latour 2005:48) my broader ethnographic inquiry. The possibility that attending to actors' own narratives and practices might put in motion inquiries which require that class-based exploitation be invoked has

perhaps escaped proponents of the postcritical turn because of an overarching concern that overdetermined, denunciatory critiques of development as the operation of concealed power blind us to “the collaboration and complicity (or duplicity) of *marginal* actors/institutions in development” (Mosse and Lewis 2006:4, emphasis added). I argue here that hewing *closer* to one’s ethnographic materials may *invite* critique, or at least the language of class-based exploitation, and that invoking such exploitation does not necessitate a retreat to broad, structural narratives or self-satisfied acts of denunciation.

In this article, therefore, I adopt what Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (2007) describes as *complicity as a methodology*. Unlike George Marcus, I do not see complicity as a mode of ethnographic engagement that demands postcritical, collaborative inquiry (Marcus 2001:521; see Gilbert and Sklair, this issue). Instead, I argue that although ethnographic research rests upon complicity – or the generation of knowledge through more-or-less intimate relationships – there is no requirement that the knowledge thus produced be nonnormative or acritical. Knowledge of the ambitions harboured by factory-owning businesspeople in Bangladesh may be derived from ethnographic complicity, but this does not mean it is necessarily opposed to, or curtailed by, a critical orientation that *arises from that very encounter*. Complicity can both “disable oppositional conviction-oriented critique because of the complex interrelationships it brings about”, and “drive oppositional critique” by prompting recognition of responsibilities to those beyond our immediate ethnographic subjects (Probyn-Rapsey 2007: 65, 79).

In the remainder of this article, I first draw on fieldwork carried out in London, and introduce aspects of the investment climate reform initiatives that the UK has been promoting in Bangladesh and elsewhere as part of its post-2010 turn towards the private sector as the primary engine of development (Mawdsley 2015). I focus in particular on the “Better Regulation” agenda, which, in-line with the World Bank’s Doing Business rankings, promotes the relaxation

and privatization of business regulation as a pathway to better development. In the second section, I draw on fieldwork carried out in Dhaka in 2013, shortly after the Rana Plaza factory collapse, in which the kinds of regulatory relaxation encouraged by the Better Regulation agenda was found to be complicit. Here I examine the attempts that financiers made to act as brokers, at once creating opportunities for profit and national development, by “re-branding” Bangladesh in the wake of Rana Plaza. In the final section before the conclusion, I introduce a group of businesspeople whom I met initially as part of an aid-funded investment climate reform project, and describe their attempts to *resist* efforts that donors make to transform Bangladesh into an easier place (for foreign investors) to do business. These same businesspeople who would resist or divert the aims of aid-funded investment climate reform projects were, nonetheless, explicitly and self-consciously *complicit* in the exploitation of RMG factory workers. I conclude by reflecting on complicity as a methodology, and challenging the viability of a nonnormative or postcritical anthropology of development when researchers may find themselves complicit, through their ongoing relationships and writing, with those who profit from the exploitation of socially distant others.

Investment climate reform & the business of aid

Bangladesh has long figured as an “aid laboratory” (Hossain 2017) for international donors and development professionals, with the women’s empowerment and microcredit programmes of large Bangladeshi NGOs like Proshika, BRAC and Grameen receiving significant donor funds and frequently being held up for international emulation. This is despite oft-articulated domestic concerns about the operating practices of these organizations and their relationships with both multinational corporations and political elites (Lewis 2011:113-125). What has been less well-studied is the emergence of a number of “investment climate reform” programmes, funded by

the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), USAID and the World Bank's private-sector arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC).

While early international business scholars bemoaned the fact that executives expressed their uncertainty about the prospect of doing business in newly independent postcolonial jurisdictions through vague synthetic terms such as “poor investment climate” (Kobrin 1982:44-46, 173), the ‘investment climate’ has now taken on a tangible, manageable aspect thanks to a proliferation of investment climate ratings and rankings (Perry-Kessaris 2011). The Bangladeshi business press eagerly awaits the annual release of rankings compiled by the World Bank's Doing Business survey, and the World Economic Forum's Competitiveness Survey, seeking evidence of whether current policy agendas are proving successful (see Gilbert 2015b). And success is, of course, measured by movement up the rankings. For countries to set explicit targets for “moving up” the Doing Business rankings is fairly common, since the regulatory criteria that require alteration in order to do so (time and effort to start a new business, access to electricity, paying taxes, getting credit, enforcing contracts in the courts) are well known (Besley 2015: 100-01; Hoyland, Moene and Willumsen 2012; Schueth 2011).

Most studies of investment climate rankings have emphasized the extent to which they produce “state extraterritoriality” (Schueth 2011:53) or promote private authority in global governance (Davis, Kingsbury and Merry 2012; Sunn Bush 2017), as ideal models of (pro-private sector, anti-union) regulation generated outside the state are implemented through consultancy-enabled fast policy. With few exceptions (e.g. Schueth 2011), ethnographic examinations of the implementation of “investment climate reform” are largely absent. In my own fieldwork, carried out between 2012-2015, I was concerned with how aid-funded investment climate reform in Bangladesh intersected with attempts by officials (and entrepreneurs) to “re-brand” Bangladesh as a frontier investment location, taking advantage of Bangladesh's inclusion in

groupings like the ‘Frontier Five’ or ‘Next-11’ by financial analysts in the City of London. In particular, I was interested in a range of initiatives part-funded by DFID as part of the turn back towards the private sector as the locus of developmental change (see Mawdsley 2015). Of these many initiatives - which included DFID/IFC-backed efforts to improve arbitration capacity and “spread the rule of law in a very American way” in order to enhance the attractiveness of Bangladesh to foreign investors (Gilbert 2018) - I focus here on the activities of the Better Regulation Delivery Office.

My fieldwork began in London at the offices of what was then the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in late 2012, at a launch even for the Better Regulation Delivery Office (BRDO). The BRDO had been founded in 2012 as part of the Coalition government’s intensification of New Labour’s move to recast business regulators as *partners* rather than as *enforcers* (Tombs 2016). The director of the BRDO declared their ambition not only to treat businesses as the “customer of regulation,” but to scale the BRDO up from being a body concerned with local government in the UK to one providing an “international model” for better regulation. This ambition was reflected in the invited presence of government officials and World Bank Group representatives from a range of countries in which DFID operates, including Bangladesh. BRDO and BIS officials spoke of the important role regulators could play by working *with* businesses to generate “prosperity” around the world.

OECD and World Bank officials took to the podium in order to cast *excessive* regulation as the primary problem impeding global prosperity via reference to Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor whose self-immolation catalysed the Arab Spring, and was a response to his persecution by state officials. While the oppression exercised by state officials in numerous contexts is certainly not without (often devastating) consequences, there is nonetheless something troubling about a UK agency promoting to the members of the Bangladesh Investment Climate

Fund who in attendance, a pathway toward development that involves enhancing the “ease of doing business” by recasting regulators as “enablers” of businesses. After all, prior to the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 (less than 6 months after this launch event), Bangladesh had already witnessed significant loss of life in dozens of factory fires and collapses, due at least in part to overburdened inspectorates (Muhammad 2011:25).

Rebranding Bangladesh

Relocating my fieldwork to Dhaka in mid-2013, I made contact with officials working on DFID and USAID-funded investment climate reform projects, as well as with those working with the government and various Chambers of Commerce to “rebrand” Bangladesh as a place in which to do business – a particular concern in the immediate aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster. One of the first working in this area, a leading figure in various efforts to re-brand Bangladesh and promote foreign direct investment through various travelling roadshows, was Ijaz². A British-Bangladeshi who emphasized that he was “actually from London” Ijaz split his time between Dhaka and London for periods of three to four weeks at a time. He had set up a brokerage house and financial analysis firm in Dhaka after spending 18 years working for global banks in the City of London, and his clients now included both financial houses in Bangladesh, and large “frontier market” focused funds based in London and New York, like BlackRock and Templeton (the “Frontier Five” and “Next-11” status of Bangladesh were displayed prominently on his firm’s promotional material). When we met in 2013, shortly after the Rana Plaza factory collapse, he was busy working on the RMG 10-point plan, part of the garment industry’s response to the crisis which had advocated government financing for RMG reforms, inspection and reclassification of factories. Ijaz’s primary concern, however, was the “Bangladesh perception deficit” and the fact that Bangladesh lacked “positive brand associations” – other than, in his view, Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank.

The Dhaka Chambers of Commerce were failing in their country branding strategy, he argued. This was especially so in comparison to the “proactive, focused, very structured long-term engagement by ‘India Inc.’” that brought together government, the private sector and the Chambers of Commerce:

And the example I like to use is at the World Economic Forum, 2006 or 2007, the *Incredible India* launch, the Indian delegation put pashminas and iPods in every delegate’s room, really influential people. And they flew in Indian chefs and Bollywood dancers. The Indian chambers are proactively sending out positive information. Bangladesh is very poor at doing that.

Ijaz’s concerns about Bangladesh’s country branding failures or “perception deficit” seemed to share something with the aid-funded investment climate reform projects outlined above. To the extent that they are about improving a country’s position on any one of a number of rankings, targeted reforms designed to enhance the “ease of doing business” are also about “rebranding.” The difference here, perhaps, is that Ijaz was more concerned with discovering the discursive strategies required to convincingly present Bangladesh as *already* being a desirable location for investment.

Ijaz explained how he drew from Simon Anholt’s work on nation-branding, which emphasizes the need for tourist boards, investment promotion agencies, cultural institutes, exporters, and politicians to work together on a long-term nation branding strategy, in order to seek “permission” (Anholt 2006:6) from consumers of exports, or potential investors. Ultimately, for Anholt, a “‘brand’ is really just a metaphor for how countries can compete more effectively in the modern age” (ibid.:23), even if it has to be “mined” out of national history, and chime

with “something fundamentally true about the place and its people” (ibid.:75). Hence, for Ijaz even Amartya Sen’s writings (e.g. Dreze and Sen 2013), which were drawing attention to Bangladesh “outperforming” India across a range of poverty indicators, could contribute to nation-branding and investment promotion strategy.

Brand Bangladesh might be outperforming India on development indicators, but it could also “undercut” China when it came to RMG production costs. This, Ijaz, explained, was “similar to the Wal-Mart effect, you know Western consumers go to Wal-Mart because it’s the cheapest. Bangladesh is the Wal-Mart of suppliers, it’s the lowest cost. It’s an inherent hedge – a real grab for value.” Ijaz also challenged the tendency for Bangladesh to be depicted as a difficult or risky place to do business in investment climate rankings and political risk reports (e.g. PRS Group 2011):

Many of the people who think Bangladesh is a risky place don’t know the country. Yes, it’s difficult, there are problems with the legal structure, corporate governance, but this is true in many emerging markets. The fact of the matter is that Bangladesh can outperform its peers.

Bangladesh might be lacking when it comes to nation branding strategy and the challenges of projecting a competitive *identity*. But, as a national economy known by its growth rate and the cost of labour, Bangladesh could *compete* as a destination for foreign direct investment, providing as it did an “inherent hedge” due to the extremely low cost of production for RMG firms (and, as many Board of Investment officials were keen to point out, no “correlation” with the post-crisis slump affecting much of the Global North).

Ijaz's attempt to rebrand Bangladesh, Board of Investment officials presenting Bangladesh as a land of "untapped opportunities," and aid-funded regulatory reform projects carried out with an eye on improving Doing Business rankings, might seem to reflect the coordination of interests amongst the bureaucratic and financial fractions of a "transnational capitalist class" (e.g. Sklair 2000). Though I maintain the importance of a critical perspective, and reject the notion that critique and ethnography are necessarily opposed modes of knowledge production, it is not my intention here to invoke the operation of some concealed power, overarching capitalist logic, or hegemonic development apparatus. Ijaz is, perhaps, an archetypal development broker, concerned with making meaning (rebranding Bangladesh) rather than taking on a specific functional role in an overarching system of domination (Mosse and Lewis 2006:20).

Brokers have in the past been treated as morally troubling, precisely because they appear to make political-economic structures dissolve into the agency of morally ambiguous individuals (James 2011). But it is equally not my intention to simply reinvigorate the mode of critique according to which brokers appear as "parasites" (Mosse and Lewis 2006:12). Instead, I hope to show that the RMG factory owners who profit directly from exporting the fruits of cheap "Wal-Mart" labour in fact have ambitions and attitudes to investment climate reform and rebranding Bangladesh that diverge significantly from those held by brokers like Ijaz. There may not be an overarching logic of capital or coordinated set of interests lurking behind the actions of brokers like Ijaz or indeed the RMG factory owners, but their own social reproduction is self-consciously complicit in the exploitation of RMG workers' labour.

Capitalist ambition and complicity in the "Republic of Gulshan"

Ijaz narrated his work in Bangladesh as a logical “next step” following his success in the City of London’s banking industry, and was concerned with “opening up” the Bangladeshi frontier through a combination of re-branding and acting as a broker for a variety of frontier market funds. This was not entirely the case for the businesspeople I met through an aid-funded investment climate reform project later in 2013. Rather than attempting to convince foreign investors that Bangladesh was *less* risky than it appeared, these wealthy elites were concerned with staving off the competition that might undermine their ability to reproduce themselves as elites in Gulshan, the enclave in which most of Dhaka’s diplomatic residencies, embassies, international clubs and self-consciously cosmopolitan elites locate themselves. Jokingly referred to as the “Republic of Gulshan” by some of its residents, there is a relative ease with which theoretically proscribed commodities can be acquired within the enclave, and Gulshan remains somewhat insulated from the *hortals* which opposition politicians often use to shut down or disrupt movement in other parts of the city.

The businesspeople discussed in this section come largely from families which have been based in Dhaka since the British or Pakistan period, and who attempt to set themselves off from more recent arrivals to the city through the performance of a specific form of cosmopolitan identity. Many have recently moved into homes and apartments in Gulshan from the increasingly densely-populated districts of Dhaka where their ancestral homes were located. Most have worked, studied or have second homes outside Bangladesh, and remain unencumbered in their travels by the increasingly punitive financial requirements placed on Bangladeshi citizens seeking visas for the UK, among other jurisdictions. While many of the individuals discussed below have made millions from their RMG factories, and some have had political aspirations, they do not belong to (and attempt to differentiate themselves from) the small core of “crony capitalists” (Mahmud et al. 2010:234) who emerged following a spate of privatizations in the 1990s. This wave of denationalization left the ownership of most previously public assets in the

hands of, by some estimates, 217 families (Haque 2002), and the majority of bank deposits controlled by a mere 37 families (Nuruzzaman 2004).

Instead, the residents of the Republic of Gulshan that are introduced below attempt to set themselves apart from those businesspeople who are *too* close to party politics in Bangladesh – or what the brother of one of the businesspeople introduced below described as the “lower-middle class” politics of the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party. They maintain and emphasize cultural links with middle-class *bhodorok* culture in Kolkata, and continue to participate in the culture of clubbability that lives on in old colonial clubs (long since open to membership from the national elite), and the newer international clubs (often only open to those Bangladeshis with dual citizenship). Echoing the process of *Ashrafization* (Mannan 2002) described elsewhere in Bangladesh, ancestral links to Mughal elites, and parents and grandparents who held significant administrative positions under British rule, were invoked – only half-jokingly – during social events held by members of this business community. My interest here is not, however, in the transformation of social capital and markers of aesthetic distinction into economic capital (cf. Gardner 2008); it is rather with the reliance upon the exploitation of factory workers that Gulshan-based factory owners rely upon for their own social reproduction, and which disappears when a ‘postcritical’ perspective is adopted.

In late 2013, I attended a parliamentary private sector caucus at an independent private sector development think tank that was headed up by a former Bangladeshi diplomat, and located in the particularly upscale ‘Gulshan-2’ district. The purpose of this donor-funded event was to survey Dhaka-based business elites on how the business environment or investment climate could be best be reformed through future initiatives. When I had first met Shaheed (a civil servant and academic who also worked at the think tank) earlier that year, he had explained the institution’s function with reference to a then-unfolding controversy about bidding for oil and

gas exploration. Finding the terms they were offered too restrictive, a number of oil and gas firms were looking instead to neighbouring Myanmar– or at least threatening to unless terms were improved. Positioning themselves as brokers with contacts in government, the civil service and the investor community, Shaheed described how

If Shell came and said, ‘we need this thing to be resolved’, we can’t just say to government, ‘this is what Shell wants.’ But let us see if we have a programme that we can fit your agenda in and with that we can go to the government.

The programmes to which he was referring were ‘multi-stakeholder’ aid-funded trade facilitation or investment climate reform programmes which the think tank regularly hosted. Several such programmes were held before the 2012/13 bidding round for oil and gas exploration finally revealed itself to be somewhat abortive (largely because several multinationals rejected government demands for restrictions on gas exports and requirements to sell to Bangladesh at low prices). Once again, this institutional brokerage might appear to resonate with frameworks like Leslie Sklair’s (2002) approach to the “transnational capitalist class,” according to which a corporate fraction works together with globalizing bureaucrats to ensure that all business interests, but *especially* those of foreign investors, are catered to in the hope that (perhaps) their investments may enhance the national interest. But, as I show below, there is not nearly so much alignment between the ambitions of bureaucrats promoting investment climate reform and the local capitalist elites whose positions are nonetheless dependent upon the exploitation of labour.

The parliamentary private sector caucus meeting was similarly supported by a variety of investment climate reform initiatives funded by DFID and USAID, and was designed to prepare

for the possibility of a change of government in early 2014 (the scheduled elections, however, never took place). As the discussions among the attendees unfolded, Sabur, an aspirant Member of Parliament and pre-eminent garment manufacturer, questioned whether Bangladesh *should* in fact be trying to “compete” for foreign direct investment, as Ijaz (who was known to most in the room) had been suggesting. Faisal, a former diplomat, argued that yes indeed, it should, citing Bangladesh’s ultimate failure to lure oil and gas investors away from Myanmar, and Vietnam’s ability to increasingly attract RMG investment, as reasons for the need to compete. Sabur disagreed vehemently:

Every day when I wake up and read the paper, I have to pinch myself.

The nation has a direction, but the Government doesn’t align. For the last forty-two years we have grown well. *This* is the Bangladesh paradox.³ As quality of governance goes down, growth goes up. Maybe we should discourage intervention, if the private sector is doing well without Parliament? The last forty-two years, the growth I am talking about has basically transformed us from an agricultural nation to an industrialist nation. We could do that very well without governance.

Rather than go for foreign direct investment, Sabur suggested that the “low hanging fruit” of those in the diaspora be turned to in order to fund capitalist development in Bangladesh. Besides, he did not feel that the attempts to re-brand Bangladesh and promote investment through the kind of roadshows that enthused Ijaz would ever serve the interests of the nation, and especially not those of the attendees at this event.

I go to these trade delegations and people don’t believe it’s a place to invest. Only when they see a white face like Jason’s, then they will

come. They are not going to be impressed by the Chairman of the Board of Investment.

Jason was the US-born executive of one of the largest multinational investment banks operating in Bangladesh, and he had been a key speaker at a number of international investor roadshows and summits that Ijaz had helped to promote (including the Board of Investment roadshow introduced at the outset of this article). But Jason's interests were certainly not aligned with the idea of fundamentally transforming Bangladesh and its reputation (as per Ijaz's ambition). When I had spoken to Jason earlier in 2013, he had stated explicitly that "we're not here to develop the country, we're here to develop clients and add value." True, the "highly trainable" population were attractive, but ultimately Bangladesh was a "diversification play": "if someone wants to throw two percent of their portfolio into Bangladesh risk, they're not making a big statement, it's just going in the soup."

Sabur continued, providing a biographically-rooted analysis of the relationship between opportunities for Gulshan-based business elites and investment climate reform that was fundamentally at odds with project embedded in the Doing Business rankings (compare also Ferguson 2006:206; also Lash 2002:45):

The highest per-capita FDI is in countries where there is no governance at all! Because they can exploit these countries. The statistics show we do not need governance. I'll tell you an anecdote. There was an American guy at Rashed *bhai's* [a mutual friend of most in attendance] son's birthday. He said if we improved Gulshan traffic, everything would be fixed in this country. I said sorry, it's *all* difficult in this country, even trying to pay tax. And I said, 'Sir, because it is so difficult,

it gives us a chance to thrive, if it was so easy you would have come to exploit us and we wouldn't be able to live in Gulshan!

At this point, one of the other attendees, a lawyer close to the ruling party whose family also had significant RMG factory holdings (as well as interests in shrimp farming and tea plantations) affirmed, “I agree, there isn't anywhere else I'd like to live in the world.”

Towards the end of 2013, I was at a dinner with Sabur, where one of the guests was the head of a small NGO which had been hired by international NGOs concerned with auditing factories in the wake of Rana Plaza - and by multinationals whose garments were produced in the Rana Plaza factory, in order to disseminate compensation. Farah, the NGO leader (whose family also had interests in a number of RMG factories) asked across the table, “Sabur, tell me, have you implemented your five percent fund yet?” The question referred to the Bangladesh Labour Law (Amendment) 2013, which demanded that five percent of profits be set aside to a worker's welfare fund, and was one of many piecemeal measures enacted to reform the RGM sector following the Rana Plaza collapse. Sabur's reply, to laughter from those in attendance was simple: “Of course not! How would I live?!” In this moment, a community of complicity (Steinmuller 2011:25) came into view, propelled by the deliberate irony of Sabur's reply. For Steinmuller, communities of complicity emerge where irony is deployed as part of an effort to create intimate spaces in which shared experience is acknowledged – along with an awareness of the (critical) representations others may produce of that intimate space. The irony here is created because everyone in attendance knows Sabur would still live perfectly well (albeit perhaps not *quite* so well), were he to implement his five percent fund. They know too that such wealth as accumulated by those in attendance with interests in RMG factories depends upon the “cheap unit price” of Bangladeshi labour, and the vast profits that are to be made through garment exports – and that this might make them subject to critique by outsiders.

David Mosse has described the dilemma faced by doctoral researchers in anthropology who find themselves pulled between the desire to stay close to one's research participants (and so forego critical distance in analysis), and a temptation to withdraw into abstract frameworks "oriented in broad terms toward leftist political critical commitments and speaking to a largely academic audience" (Mosse 2015:135). I would suggest that adopting complicity as a methodology (Probyn-Rapsey 2007) offers an alternative to the putative choice between subordinating analysis to overdetermined political-economic frameworks and deferring to the understandings of your interlocutors; one which is all the more necessary when writing about powerful economic and political actors whose social position explicitly, and by their own (albeit ironic) admission depends upon exploitation. Probyn-Rapsey (2007), following Sanders (2002), notes that while complicity or "foldedness" into the lives of others may *disable* critique by dissipating oppositional convictions, it may equally *drive* oppositional critique by prompting recognition of responsibilities. These responsibilities may be to our ethnographic interlocutors, but they may also extend further. This is especially the case when working with powerful subjects who may themselves be complicit in reconfiguring the terrain of social reproduction for those less powerful. In such instances, adopting a nonnormative or postcritical stance hostile to the language of class and capitalism may curtail understanding, just as postcritical scholars fear critique does (cf. Yarrow 2008).

In his work with Rana Plaza survivors, Rashedur Chowdhury (2017a, 2017b) has been critical of the elite Bangladeshi NGOs (including the celebrated BRAC) for their complicity in the behaviour of multinational retailers, whose pursuit of cheap labour and fast lead times had created the conditions for poorly regulated "unofficial" subcontractor factories like those housed in the Rana Plaza complex. By taking on the disbursement of compensation to victims of Rana Plaza and their families, thereby allowing multinational retailers to "subcontract morality" to them (Chowdhury 2017b:943), elite NGOs both provided retailers with legitimacy

and contributed to the silencing of the voices of those who frequently received inadequate compensation or support from those same NGOs. Chowdhury's (2017a) potent and emotive ethnographic writing emerges from encounters with Rana Plaza survivors; his "foldedness" into their lives generates a critique of those who have failed the subjects of his writing. Being aware of the exploitation on which the RMG industry depends is itself enough to generate a similar kind of foldedness, or what Sanders (2002) terms responsibility-in-complicity, and my argument here is that such responsibility-in-complicity should not be dissipated when ethnographic work is carried out among elites, merely because of a notion that critique is necessarily crude or somehow anti-ethnographic. Indeed, the ironic recognition by elites of their *own* complicity in the exploitation of others can provide an entry point into ethnography which is as necessarily critical as it is sensitive to context.

Conclusion: class, critique and complicity

My intention during the fieldwork on which this article is based was never to "get the ethnographic goods" on elites (cf. Marcus 1998:27). Instead, my concern was to trace out the relationship between UK (and multilateral) donor-funded investment climate reform projects, and the attempts that the Bangladeshi state and Dhaka-based brokers make to "rebrand" Bangladesh as an investment frontier. The decision to invoke class-like relationships of exploitation, and cast a critical gaze on the strategies for social reproduction adopted by factory-owning businesspeople in Gulshan, is not motivated by a desire to cast myself in a morally redemptive critical role (cf. Marcus 2012:40; Felski 2015:51). Nor do I lay claim to *already knowing* that investment climate reform is yet another instance of the hegemonic development apparatus playing out, or that business-political elites in Gulshan act as they do *because* of their class position. Quite the opposite.

There is no machinic development apparatus at play here, but a contingent alignment between regulatory agendas adopted by successive UK governments (e.g. BRDO), the attributes of investment climates measured by indices like the Doing Business rankings (which capture the attention of certain policy elites in Dhaka), and the efforts of certain financiers who have positioned themselves as brokers between frontier market investment funds and “Brand Bangladesh” Equally, it is not my intention to impose a rigid language of class position on to my ethnographic subjects in order to “explain away” their behaviour. Ijaz and Sabur, for instance, have quite divergent ambitions for the future of Bangladesh and the extent to which foreign investors and businesspeople might (or should) be encouraged to operate there, in a “reformed” or “rebranded” investment climate. Class-like relations of exploitation – some of which are all-too-explicit, as in the case of Sabur’s reluctance to turn over a fraction of his profits to his workforce – *are* present and significant, but class is not an external logic that exists outside of Sabur’s (or Ijaz’s) rooted (or mobile) projects of social reproduction, which take place within specific sets of social relations.

Rather than rehabilitate the form of critique that post-critical scholars take to be their target (and to which perhaps some, but by no means all avowedly critical scholars subscribe), or retreating into a “traditional critical project that uses (Western) theoretical resources (such as moral philosophy) to judge, undermine or ratify” the lives of others (Gad et al. 2015:82), I have attempted to work with *complicity* as a methodological disposition. Marcus’ (2001) writing on complicity and ethnography led him towards (non-critical) collaborative engagement with those who are complicit with powerful institutions of social change. I would suggest, however, that Probyn-Rapsey’s (2007) approach to complicity as methodology can offer a potent template for ethnographers who wish to maintain an openness to novelty, surprise and understanding in the field without wishing to foreclose *a priori* upon the potential for critical writing that may arise from entering into communities of complicity with those whose projects of social reproduction

imply the exploitation, precarity or indebtedness of others. For the anthropology of development, this is perhaps all the more urgent as donor funding increasingly operates through private sector vehicles and initiatives (Lightfoot et al. 2017). It would be a strange anthropology indeed that could independently make space for ethnographies of RMG factory workers, the development professionals working on investment climate reform, brokers seeking to rebrand Bangladesh, and RMG factory owners who contest investment climate reform while profiting from export-oriented investment and cheap labour – but disguise the unstable, exploitative and antagonistic interdependences which tie their worlds together for fear that critique works *against* greater understanding.

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¹ As per promotional literature circulated before, and available at, the event. The emphasis here is mine.

² As with all names in this article, this has been altered to preserve anonymity.

³ Here Sabur was referencing a much-discussed concept in development economics, the 'Bangladesh paradox': the putative paradox is that on a number of human development indicators (infant mortality, under-5 mortality, maternal mortality, as well as female literacy and education), Bangladesh outperforms India and Pakistan, despite significantly lower per

capita GDP and per capita income. For many commentators, this can be accounted for by the post-Liberation establishment of thriving, now global, NGOs like BRAC and Grameen.