



The Moral Dimensions of Economic Life: Cross-Regional Perspectives

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St Antony's College, Oxford

Organizers:

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Morality has recently become a central theme in the Social Sciences, leading to a revival and reevaluation of the concept of 'moral economy' (Götz 2015, Sayer 2015, Palomera and Vetta 2016, Wiegratz 2016), and a growing interest in the (contested) morality of markets and market behaviour (Abend 2014, Bloom 2017, Melzer & Kautz 2018). Despite such cross-disciplinary interest, however, there is a significant lack of explicit and sustained cross-regional analysis, especially when it comes to the (highly nascent) scholarship on capitalist moral-economic order and its respective constitution and dynamic. Currently, scholars overwhelmingly research and write with a regional focus, e.g. Eastern European, African, or Pacific-Asia Studies (Gregory and Altman 2018, Humphrey and Mandel 2002, Kimambo 2008). Cross-regional perspectives have been restricted to a handful of edited volumes focusing on particular themes, such as fraud, religion, urban space or nationalism and ethnic conflict (Whyte and Wiegratz 2016; Sykes 2008, Berman et. al 2016, Rudnyckyj and Osella 2017, Ruppert 2006). Indeed, while a very few recent publications discussing some of the moral properties and dynamics of neoliberal economy and society, have reached significant non-academic audiences they have generally been rather polemic in nature, significantly undertheorized, and/or lacking in primary data.

A consequence of the silo-effect of such Area Studies based moral economy research has been frequent claims of regional exceptionality, with much less discussion of the extent to which observed moral-economic phenomena reflect, for instance, more general, global capitalist structures, factors, and trends, both past and present, and are thus in some ways comparable. There has been little direct comparison of regional cases for the explicit purposes of generating new empirical and conceptual insights regarding the morality-economy nexus as such and, importantly, its interconnection with the political economy. Driven by, amongst others, institutional, disciplinary, and political specificities and legacies (colonialism, post-colonialism, the Cold War, etc.), this significant disinterest and/or reluctance to-date to embrace cross-regional enquiry and dialogue is coupled with a dominant application of the concept of moral economy to the analysis of pro-social (aka customary, traditional, etc.) values, norms, and relationships, and a pre-dominant disinterest/reluctance to analyse explicitly (let alone in a comparative manner) the political economy of capitalist moral economy including the moral grammar of practices such as fraud, intimidation, violence, exploitation, or taking advantage of others' vulnerability, i.e. deceiving and/or harming others (Wiegratz 2016, 2019, Edelman 2012, Palomera and Vetta 2016, Neu 2017).

Workshop Aims and Format

This workshop seeks to address this imbalance in the research focus and agenda of moral economy scholarship by offering room to discuss capitalist moral economy - and its characteristics, dynamics and politics/political economy - in a cross-regional perspective. We are interested in advancing the debate about moral economy in two major and interconnected ways: (i) identifying the impact of global conditions and drivers in the (re-)constitution of national/local moral-economies, particularly those linked to and originating from global capitalism, and (ii) moving academic analysis into a more global, comparative direction by repositioning national and regional debates about moral economy within wider, cross-regional empirical, theoretical, and methodological contexts.

Forming the culmination of three previous workshops dedicated to the moral dimensions of economic life in Africa (Uppsala and Cologne 2018), and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Eurasia (Oxford 2019), this workshop aims to take concrete steps towards generating research questions, themes, and funding for cross-regional initiatives on the moral dimensions of economic life in a capitalist context. We are particularly interested in hearing about existing, planned, or imaginable activities that explore the role of actually existing morals and moral subjectivities in the (co-)production of the capitalist economy and its socio-political characteristics.

As such, the workshop will take the form of three discussion-based sessions centred on the following questions:

1. Why undertake cross-regional research on moral-economic phenomena/moral economies (and their respective drivers, characteristics, dynamics etc.) in capitalism? What does a focus on the morality-economy nexus – moreover in a comparative manner - offer to our understanding of global capitalism? What claims and theoretical advancements are we after and why?
2. What social phenomena are ripe for (i.e. would be suitable for and benefit from) a comparative (cross-regional) moral economy research? What structures, actors, practices, trends etc. should be subject to comparative research? What can be gained from studying the moral-economic phenomenon of concern in a comparative manner (cross country/region)?
3. How should we undertake such a project? What models and methodologies show potential? What are methodical issues to consider?

If you would like to join us for the day please contact nicolette.makovicky@area.ox.ac.uk by March 10 th, 2019. Participation is open to a maximum of 40 persons. Please send us 2-3 sentences on how you would like to contribute to the discussion (e.g. themes, points/arguments, questions, and debates you would like to foreground), as well as whether and how you have mobilized (or how you could mobilize) global theories/cross-regional comparisons in your own work.

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