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REVIEW ARTICLE

Translating transactions: Markets as epistemic and moral spheres

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Abstract

In this *Modern Asian Studies* book symposium, scholars of South Asia analyse the political, ethical, and epistemic aspects of market life. They build on the 2020 Cambridge volume, *Rethinking Markets in Modern India: Embedded Exchange and Contested Jurisdiction*, edited by Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas Haynes, and Sebastian Schwecke. This interdisciplinary conversation approaches transactional realms from the disciplines of history, anthropology, development studies, and political economy. The symposium's contributors examine a range of pertinent issues that encompass customary forms of exchange and capitalist aspects of trade. Among the topics discussed are those of market fetishism, bazaar knowledge, social embeddedness, forms of transactional representation and translation, and institutional and regulatory contexts for commerce.

Keywords: Differential embeddedness; transactional epistemes; market context and content; representing and translating exchange; Indian capitalism

Introduction

Our response to the careful, invigorating reviews of our volume, begins, as many things have in recent years, with the coronavirus. Covid was a public health, governance, and moral crisis in India. It also catalysed market perturbations—and opportunities.¹ Scarce goods and services—hospital beds, oxygen cylinders, ambulances, plasma, and Remdesivir—provided transactional openings. Strategic hoarding, by

¹The emergent scholarship on the market dimensions of India's pandemic includes Vikas Rawal, Manish Kumar, Ankur Verma and Jesim Pais, 'COVID-19 lockdown: Impact on agriculture and rural economy', *Social Scientist*, vol. 48, no. 3/6, 2020, pp. 67–82; Surbhi Kesar, Rosa Abraham, Rahul Lahoti, Paaritosh Nath and Amit Basole, 'Pandemic, informality, and vulnerability: Impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods in India', Centre for Sustainable Employment, Working Paper no. 27, Azim Premji University, 2020.

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some, entailed ruinous indebtedness for others. Forms of arbitrage unfolded alongside triage. Accessing public goods, such as respirators, meant catalysing networks of influence. Existential needs, such as funerals for one's intimates, were out of reach for the poorest. The less politically connected took desperately to social media to leverage others' proximity to assistance. This generated socially savage exchanges. During 2021's surge, Arundhati Roy observed 'India's morbid new stock exchange', where the grief-stricken should pay 'a bribe to sneak a last look at your loved one, bagged and stacked in the hospital mortuary. A surcharge for a priest who agrees to say the final prayers'.²

For all its novel dimensions, this crisis, as regards market behaviour, has historical precedents. India's modern wars, famines, and mass migrations generated similar patterns of swapping and hedging, and of bargain and collusion.³ And likewise, what we might darkly term 'market innovation'.⁴ The emergence, during social crisis, of brokerage actors, the proliferation of scams and counterfeiting, the prevalence of cheating and conspiracy, all have lineages.⁵ Thus India's Covid will be remembered as much for duplicate drugs and hoarded air filters as for flaming pyres and imploring WhatsApp messages. The official response to the pandemic's commercial aspects also has continuities with the past. India's post-independence decades were punctuated by social panics of goods shortages, a public discourse of hoarding, and political scapegoating of profiteers.⁶ Likewise, during the pandemic, public goods became scarce, key items

²Arundhati Roy, "'We are witnessing a crime against humanity': Arundhati Roy on India's Covid catastrophe", *The Guardian*, published online on 28 April 2021, available at www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/28/crime-against-humanity-arundhati-roy-india-covid-catastrophe, [accessed 11 May 2023].

³The Second World War, in particular, was a key moment when Indian speculators and producers could, through strategic hoarding and black marketing, amass profits and evade regulatory scrutiny. See Indivar Kamtekar, 'A different war dance: State and class in India, 1939–1945', *Past and Present*, vol. 176, 2002, pp. 187–221. For a historical perspective on hoarding, see David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and usurers in western India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). On the ambiguity of hoarding strategies in South Asia and assumptions of liquidity preference in Keynesian economics, see A. G. Chandavarkar, 'The nature and effects of gold hoarding in under-developed economies', *Oxford Economic Papers (New Series)*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1961, pp. 137–148.

⁴The transactional ingenuity evident during India's pandemic casts into bleak relief the much-lauded idea of *jugaad*. This is the ethos of makeshift craftiness purportedly intrinsic to Indian society. See Purnima Manekar, "'We are like this only': Aspiration, jugaad, and love in enterprise culture", in *Enterprise culture in neoliberal India*, (ed.) Nandini Gooptu (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 27–41; Ravinder Kaur, 'The innovative Indian: Common man and the politics of jugaad culture', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2016, pp. 313–327; Thomas Birtchnell, 'Jugaad as systemic risk and disruptive innovation in India', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2011, pp. 357–372.

⁵Covid's most stark historical precedent, in this sense, was India's Emergency period in the 1970s. Market actors hoarded grains and other essential goods, and the state's sterilization and slum removal drive catalysed a range of inadvertent brokerage activities. See Francine Frankel, *India's political economy, 1947–1977: The gradual revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 480–547; Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (London: Hurst, 2003), pp. 178–201. On the general prevalence of counterfeiting in India, see Sanjay Srivastava, 'Duplicity, intimacy, community: An ethnography of ID cards, permits and other fake documents in Delhi', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 113, no. 1, 2012, pp. 78–93.

⁶A novel category of crimes—socioeconomic offences—encompassing tax evasion, food adulteration, and illegal trading emerged after Indian independence. This was an outcome of extensive state controls set up during the Second World War, as well as goods shortages and the prevalence of substandard products. On the villainous imagery ascribed in the mid-twentieth century to Indian hoarders, speculators,

were co-opted by connected classes, and leaders deflected administrative failings.⁷ Politicians, as our collection of essays shows, are not neutral actors in market life. But some politicians compartmentalized and moralized, creating a dichotomy between the righteous public and ruthless black marketeers.⁸

The pandemic is not our central focus here. Yet the re-emergence, during the pandemic, of such patterns in Indian markets provides an impetus to respond to the reviewers—Muhammad Ali Jan, Anand Yang, Isabelle Guérin, and Johan Mathew—for this *Modern Asian Studies* symposium. They provide us, as editors, a belated opportunity to rectify not having written a conclusion, which might have tied together distinct contributions. By tackling their critiques and provocations, we refine our book's orienting concepts.

Our response is divided into five themes. Through them, we synthesize and explore our reviewers' reflections. The first theme is the *analytical fetish* of markets as a foundational and self-animating entity. The second theme concerns the modes of *differential embeddedness* of economic transactions in a range of cultural and social relations. The third reflects upon *transactional epistemes*: the varied, proximate forms of knowledge braided in the market. The fourth regards markets as *arenas of representation and translation*, since exchange is suffused with intentions and connotations apart from profit maximization. The fifth and final theme considers the *context and content* of market transactions. This refers to the institutional and regulatory scaffolding—the context—that frames the content of transactions, including symbolic and moral aspirations.

The market as analytical fetish

Yang, Mathew, and Jan each note that in a volume on markets, there is a marked paucity of actual commercial sites. In other words, there may be a discrepancy between titular promise and delivery. As Yang writes of the book, 'empirical markets, certainly not marketplaces, are not its primary interest', though they figure in several chapters. Further, the chapters underscore, as Mathew astutely notes, that the *market is itself an analytical fetish*: something that takes on the appearance of being a priori and autonomous, even to the extent of possessing agency. So the use of markets as an overarching umbrella term certainly requires explanation. Beyond that, does it, as a concept, deserve dismantling? We share the dissatisfaction with some uses of 'market' as a term. It is perhaps a similar predicament with other terms of earlier vintage that reify and homogenize—among them, 'society', 'culture', and 'the state'. The question

and black marketeers, see Rohit De, *A people's constitution: The everyday life of law in the Indian Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 92–99. On the developmental imagery of moneylenders, see Christopher A. Gregory, 'Village money lending, the World Bank and landlessness in central India', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1988, pp. 47–58.

⁷On similar political machinations during the 1970s Emergency, see Gyan Prakash, *Emergency chronicles: Indira Gandhi and democracy's turning point* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁸For example, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath denied government shortages, instead blaming hoarders and black marketeers. See Omar Rashid, 'Oxygen shortage: Seize property of those spreading rumours: Yogi Adityanath', *The Hindu*, published online on 25 April 2021, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/seize-property-of-those-spreading-rumours-up-cm/article34404518.ece>, [accessed 11 May 2023].

is less whether the market concept has outlasted its utility, but whether we can better convey its meanings.⁹

Mathew provides a useful provocation in inviting us to dispense with market altogether as a category. Rather than illuminate, the term often seems to obfuscate. The use of markets—denoting both actual exchange patterns and mental abstractions—invites a delineation confined to economics and counterpoised to politics and society. Yet this demarcation also reflects uses of the term by people participating in exchange and is thus socially and politically embedded. When the term ‘market’ is employed, it denotes a specific socialized transactional order—but also an attendant normative value against which other transactional orders are measured. That is why those non-normative markets are, by participants and observers alike, often portrayed as markets-with-adjectives or with exotic terminologies. What distinguishes a black market or bazaar from markets, at the same time, is what people make of it, including academic observers. Should we displace the reference point if any other term we could establish in its stead would merely produce a new layer of normativity?

We emphasize that the manifold uses of ‘market’ as a term—nowadays, but also historically—inform the navigation of what might be termed ‘socialized transactional orders’. We agree that ‘markets’—wherever they are not specifically addressing a conglomeration of locations for exchange—enter society via the imagination. Yet the employment of terms denoting transactional orders creates both meaning and materiality. The imagination of a market imparts to its participants the information they need for behavioural assessments and profits.

Mechanisms of price formation, for instance, provide real information about costs and returns that market participants would disregard at their own peril, yet still remain tied to imagination. Instead of producing a common scale of valuation, they produce conversion scales for different valuations broadly imagined as commensurate by the transactional parties. For a small-scale farmer 180 rupees have a very different value than to a middle-class urban resident, and so does a kilogram of pulses, relating both to their respective incomes as well as the availability of the concerned good and money. The different valuations remain once both sides have agreed on a price, even if we leave out the several layers of intermediation such exchange entails.

Imagination, in other words, produces the embedding of markets in society. It is precisely the conceptual separation of markets, society, and politics—a process of imagination—that informs a wide range of decision-making in our times. It provides for what arguably is the dominant type of market *embeddedness* in the contemporary period, constituting the ‘form’¹⁰ against which most other imaginations of markets in our times are arrayed. We would merely fall into the trap of imagining a ‘disembedded market’ as a non-embedded market—and therefore as fundamentally distinct

⁹The genealogy of historical uses of the market as a category shows its ongoing relevance, as evidenced by Mohamed Ouerfelli’s work on fifteenth-century Sicilian sugar markets, and Jairus Banaji’s analysis on the market’s centrality to the long history of commercial capitalism. See Mohamed Ouerfelli, ‘The Sicilian sugar trade in the western Mediterranean in the later Middle Ages’, in *Urban dynamics and transcultural communication in medieval Sicily*, (eds) Martin Baumeister, Mihran Dabag, Nikolas Jaspert and Achim Lichtenberger (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 291–304; Jairus Banaji, *A brief history of commercial capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2020).

¹⁰The formalism-substantivism debate in economic anthropology revolved considerably around the question of the respective validities of cultural specificity or universal applicability for explaining the

from the process of embedding—if we pretended to remove the inherent Western biases in the terminology underlying normative functionality, either by dispensing with the term ‘markets’ altogether, or by turning ‘markets’ into yet another market-with-adjectives. While Karl Polanyi may not have considered ‘embeddedness’ in this way, the disembedding of markets is very much an outcome of the social structures into which markets are embedded, so that the Polanyian equation of disembedding markets with ‘non-embedded’ markets needs to be understood within its specific role in Polanyi’s theory.

As Yang notes, the volume does not—and, we might add, cannot—answer the question of whether the relationship of society to markets is ‘complementary or constitutive’. This chicken-or-egg debate is not our fight. And we might add that the question of what is complementary or constitutive need not be framed as an either-or question. Both are possible. Thus we take for granted that the social is not a pregiven demarcated sphere; rather, it is coproduced with transactional flux. Our focus is on unearthing this *dynamic entanglement of commerce and culture*. It may be impossible to resolve whether society or culture does, as Yang writes, ‘inflect economic transactions or constitute them’.

Where we can make a contribution concerns going beyond the general logic of market exchange. One buys as cheaply as possible and sells as dearly as one can. There is a prevailing impetus to capitalism—exploit, accumulate as private property, and expand production—in which the institutional and behavioural complexities of our collection are themselves embedded. Yet, we should not essentialize the differences between capitalist and non-capitalist orders as based merely on the general logics of exploitation, accumulation, and expanded production. While there is no way around these overarching parameters, however much we might wish to eliminate ‘markets’ or ‘capitalism’ as terms, the manner in which *the tensions* between the general and the particular play out is what gives India, and any other place, its social and economic character.

Here, it is useful to revisit Polanyi’s three principles of exchange: they are not teleologically or historically sequenced but can and do coexist.¹¹ Institutions in which market exchange are embedded are also capable of cradling reciprocal and redistributive activity. Confident about this finding, in our future work, or perhaps in a later edition of this collection, it would be useful to tease out the argument that market rationality is becoming more important in market exchange, as the performativity of economics literature suggests.¹² The study of price formation and price behaviour, and indeed of costs and returns—which Jan notes is neglected by our contributors—would be an indispensable input for such an enquiry. This suggestion also highlights another lacuna in our volume: we did not look at market functions but rather their operational

operational grammars in socioeconomic life, with the latter depicted as ‘form’. For an overarching discussion of this debate, see Chris Hann and Keith Hart, *Economic anthropology: History, ethnography, critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

¹¹Polanyian ideas and their relevance for contemporary thinking on socialized transactional orders continue to be re-evaluated. See the contributions to the special issue ‘New directions in Polanyian scholarship’ in *Economy and Society* (2014), including its introduction: Christopher Holmes, ‘Introduction: A post-Polanyian political economy for our times’, *Economy and Society*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2014, pp. 525–540.

¹²Michel Callon, ‘Performativity, misfires and politics’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 3, no. 2, July 2010, pp. 163–169.

grammars.¹³ Taking our exploration in such a future direction would help map the functions of markets overlooked in our earlier venture.

Let us briefly discuss the alternative nomenclature to markets, among them, well-discussed notions of the bazaar, informal sector, and exchange. Certainly, as in the important literature that precedes our volume, the bazaar, as a historical, spatial, and political reality, captures some of the entwined aspects our authors explore. The bazaar—as a trans-regional and transactional reality across the Indian Ocean, and as a set of moral and regulatory imperatives—seems to encompass, rather than differentiate, aspects of the social and political that are excluded from the concept of the market.¹⁴ But the bazaar is also analytically weighed down, and perhaps constricted, by previous efforts to differentiate it from modern exchange.¹⁵ Similarly, the ‘informal sector’ as well as the ‘parallel’ and ‘grey economy’—howsoever defined—take on specific meanings that capture parts of what we describe, but not the entirety of market embeddedness.¹⁶

We note, too, labile conceptions of ‘exchange’ that inspire scholars. Georg Simmel, for instance, posited that exchange was constitutive of society.¹⁷ Yet exchange for Simmel was much more than the exchange of goods and services. The latter was understood as part of human interaction rooted in communication and information. What is exchanged on markets comprises goods and services or, better yet, what can be thought of as goods and services. Yet it does so in ways that crucially hinge on wider forms of human interaction, without which ‘exchange’, in its narrow, economic meaning, lacks the instruments for meaning-making through valuation and the handling of uncertainty. Divisions and classifications of markets have emerged historically (and in regionally specific ways) as expressions of the manners in which people make sense of specific sub-sets of human interaction.¹⁸ The resulting nomenclature—with all its ambiguities, and crucially also extending to the idea of ‘the market’—needs to be treated in precisely this way. Their vocabulary is an indication of what people consider to be important in the transactional orders they intend to enter, and their relationship to other such orders.

To call a socialized transactional order a ‘bazaar’ carries meaning, and a meaning that changes over time in diverse social contexts. For example, when the British established the aptly called ‘New Market’ in Calcutta in the late nineteenth century

¹³See the discussion of structure and performance in industrial organization in J. S. Bain, *Industrial organization* (London: J. Wiley and Sons, 1959).

¹⁴Rajat Kanta Ray, ‘Asian capital in the age of European domination: The rise of the bazaar, 1800–1914’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1995, pp. 449–554; Narges Erami and Arang Keshavarzian, ‘When ties don’t bind: Smuggling effects, bazaars and regulatory regimes in postrevolutionary Iran’, *Economy and Society*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2015, pp. 110–139.

¹⁵Clifford Geertz, ‘Suq: the bazaar economy in Sefrou’, in *Meaning and order in Moroccan society*, (eds) Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz and Lawrence Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 123–244; Frank Fanselow, ‘The bazaar economy or how bizarre is the bazaar really?’, *Man (New Series)*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1990, pp. 250–265.

¹⁶Martha Chen and Françoise Carré (eds), *The informal economy revisited: Examining the past, envisioning the future* (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁷Georg Simmel, *The sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950).

¹⁸See Frank Perlin, *City intelligible: A philosophical and historical anthropology of global commoditization before industrialization* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

for the use of European residents, consisting of ‘orderly’ arrays of department stores, the North Indian hinterland acquired a series of newly emergent commercial arenas.¹⁹ With names such as ‘New Market’, ‘New Bazaar’, or ‘Orderly Bazaar’, they still resonate in contemporary place-names. Yet in the present day, the epitome of ‘modernity’ concerning commercial arenas has shifted—to malls, hypermarkets, and online retail. The term ‘market’ (in early twentieth-century South Asia) denoted the ‘order’ imposed by clustered departmental stores—a far cry, for instance, from the distinction between stores and markets in early modern Europe described by Fernand Braudel.²⁰

Yet beyond appearances and architecture, the ‘order’ indicates desires for very specific socialized transactional orders: in terms of price formation and quality standardization as much as in the separation of the bazaar’s commerce from what was considered vice, or from the specific form of rationality propagated for ‘ordered’ markets by the Indian state.²¹ North Indian bazaars were considerably ‘sanitized’ of prostitution in the middle decades of the twentieth century, for instance, while many metropolitan malls in contemporary India actually serve as hubs for prostitution without being perceived as non-modern.²² In a similar vein, Adam Smith—writing as a free-trader opposed to the monopoly position of the East India Company—would plausibly not have agreed to our contemporary use of ‘the market’ as indicating a rational arena of exchange that also includes Silicon Valley tech giants whose monopoly positions significantly impede competition, thus compromising the underlying tenets of the Smithian ‘invisible hand’. Instead of arguing over the classificatory systems, it is our contention that we should focus more on what participants mean when they use terms for specific socialized transactional orders.

Our volume is ultimately an invitation to others to deepen a supple analytical vocabulary. As we wrote in our book’s introduction, for all the limitations in understanding market life, there is much to embrace in terms of earlier lineages that invited a supple understanding.²³ We wish to further the refinement of a syntax not as easily lent to bifurcations such as the formal-informal and organized-unorganized,²⁴ in which realms of the social and commercial are contiguous rather than compartmentalized. The concerns over nomenclature and classification, thus, are directly linked to the manners in which we and our contributors engaged with questions of embeddedness.

¹⁹Saikat Maitra and Sebastian Schwecke, ‘Shopping elsewhere: Retail revolutions and the spectacle of retail in contemporary India’, *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies, Perspectives*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2021, available at https://ijaps.usm.my/?page_id=6486, [accessed 11 May 2023].

²⁰Fernand Braudel, *The wheels of commerce* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 62–80.

²¹The question of bazaar rationality, for instance, has long been an undercurrent of studying this transactional order. Frank Fanselow, for instance, implicitly argued that while the bazaar was rational, its rationality was bounded by the prevalence of non-standardized goods, thus implicitly separating it from the seemingly universal rationality of markets. Fanselow, ‘The bazaar economy’.

²²Saikat Maitra and Srabani Maitra, ‘Producing the aesthetic self. An analysis of aesthetic skill and labour in the organized retail industries in India’, *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2018, pp. 337–357.

²³See Thorstein Veblen’s critique of the compromising roles of instincts, habits, and routines on market rationality, which paved the way for a century of evolutionary institutionalist analysis. Thorstein Veblen, *The place of science in modern civilisation and other essays* (New York: Huebsch, 1919).

²⁴Chen and Carré, *Informal economy revisited*.

Differential embeddedness

Our reviewers, notably Jan and Yang, excavate the grounding of the volume's notion of 'embedded exchange'. As both note, our use of 'embedding' diverges from that of Polanyi. His modern market was, as Jan terms it, the 'antithesis of embedded forms of exchange'. The markets we observed include customary forms of 'reciprocity' and 'redistribution' that Yang unpacks. Yang sees that our volume skirts around this 'overly stark dichotomy' between reciprocity and redistribution, in which they can coexist with market allocation and not be antiethical. In fact, our book has shown how all Indian markets, including highly technological, rationalized, and financialized ones, are socially embedded. In the ecology of Indian commerce, social flora and political fauna fill all the economic niches. As Mathew notes, in the volume, 'caste structures', 'durable personal relationships', and 'social connections' and reputations—not an impersonal rational abstraction—are central to finance and trade.

Even urbanized, transnational entities—as observers of the Parsi politics lurking behind the Tata conglomerate, or the familial machinations inflecting the Reliance companies know—are not abstracted from the people who comprise them.²⁵ But Jan and Yang's reviews pose a related, and more intriguing, question. If we agree that markets do not eliminate customary exchange, and are not opposed to the social and political more broadly, are they embedded in these latter realms in the same way?

Our response is that we see them not as uniformly but as *differentially embedded*. Here, we take inspiration from Jan's suggestion that what is embedded are variegated 'forms and points' in a 'continuum'. In other words, there is not an unvarying and standardized 'social' in which the transactional is imbricated. Rather, especially when, as Jan puts it, 'vast distances and heterogeneous groups' are involved, the commercially implanted emerges from 'constant construction, reconstruction, and maintenance'. This is especially important given Guérin's intervention. She reminds us that jurisdictions create unevenness, and that reputations and distinctions are unsmooth. Therefore, the interplay of reputation and jurisdiction is antagonistic and asymmetric. The working poor who default on microfinance loans are, as studies show, often surveilled and shamed.²⁶ Meanwhile Indian 'wilful defaulters' who contest extradition in London courts—and their creditors by proxy—mend their reputations in plush seclusion.²⁷

In all such instances, embeddedness is not unvarying but remains correlated to control—and clout. This is not merely about the scale of power but the kind of authority in market exchange. In other words, influence concerns not absolute quantity but varying qualities; forms of authority grounded in caste, religion, region, patriarchy,

²⁵Mircea Raianu, *Tata: the global corporation that built Indian capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021); Hamish McDonald, *Ambani and sons* (Delhi: Roli Books, 2010).

²⁶Lamia Karim, *Microfinance and its discontents: Women in debt in Bangladesh* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Sohini Kar, *Financializing poverty: Labor and risk in Indian microfinance* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018); Isabelle Guérin, 'Juggling with debt, social ties, and values', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 55, supplement 9, 2014, pp. 40–50.

²⁷Amy Kazmin, 'High stakes as Narendra Modi takes on India's "king of good times"', *Financial Times*, 24 September 2018, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/78ac076e-2cf4-11e8-9b4b-bc4b9f08f381>, [last accessed 27 January 2023].

and class notions mesh in complex ways to shape the contours of exchange.²⁸ Whether market reputations are gossiped about on the street or computer-coded in balance sheets, they show these striated social connotations, what we call *differential embeddedness*. Polanyi's use of the term 'embeddedness' may then retrospectively be understood as too passive: an outcome, likely, of his intention to contrast it with the 'active' employment of disembedding by proponents of rational abstraction. The substantivist-formalist debates that emerged from this use, in turn, tended to stress this contrast by equating society with tradition. This conflates 'embeddedness' with resilience against one particular form of 'disembedding'—a far cry, for instance, from Simmel's fluid conception of the relationship between society and exchange.²⁹

It may be that the disembedded market—as opposed to the interpretation of disembedding as non-embeddedness, implying the cessation of contestation over social embeddedness—mirrors different forms of social embeddedness in itself, reflecting changes in the set-up of social structures in nineteenth-century Europe as in Polanyi's analysis of the Victorian labour market as the rupture signalling the advent of market disembeddedness at scale.³⁰ For us, the salient aspect to highlight is that neither 'embeddedness' nor 'disembeddedness' are inert constructs. At all times, they rely on purposive human agency to make transactional orders work.

The regulation of the price of bread in early modern Europe, to employ E. P. Thompson's famous example, constituted an attempt by the state (and church) to control the potentially unruly crowd of the poor, a constant anxiety among the elite in early modern European societies.³¹ Adam Smith's earlier argument that bakers were not baking bread out of altruism merely constituted a polemical treatment of a particular form of market embeddedness—propagating the 'rational' abstraction of markets from its social moorings—that (whether consciously or not) overlooked this dimension and benefitted the sellers of bread over its buyers.³² Analogously, contemporary moneylenders in Banaras use reputational gossip as a tool for handling uncertainty because other socially embedded tools (like the modern regulatory state) fail to provide viable alternatives.³³ Markets—as the amalgamation of their participants—mobilize what is available to these participants, and what at least partially serves their participants' purposes, with the latter depending on the respective standing of participants in the market. The tools available to the market participants, at the same time, rest on their knowledge and information—the epistemic basis for exchange.

²⁸ Barbara Harriss-White, *India working: Essays on society and economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Georg Simmel, *The philosophy of money* (London: Routledge, 2004 [1900]).

³⁰ Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1944]).

³¹ Etienne Balibar and Warren Montag, *Spinoza and politics* (London: Verso Books, 2007); Antonio Negri, *The political Descartes: Reason, ideology, and the bourgeois project* (London: Verso, 2006); E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, vol. 50, 1971, pp. 76–136.

³² Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981 [1776]), pp. 26–27.

³³ Sebastian Schwecke, 'A tangled jungle of disorderly transactions? The production of a monetary outside in a North Indian town', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2018, pp. 1375–1419.

Braided transactional epistemes

The reviewers note how our contributors unpack the proximate knowledge-forms that entwine in commerce. Mathew foregrounds an implicit element of our book: that our chapters offer a ‘critique of markets as sites of rational calculation by demonstrating how actors engage in exchanges through a quite incompatible form of reason’. We agree that one of our ambitions is to demonstrate how exchange is patterned by plural logics. These conceptual modalities include—but do not privilege and are not confined to—economics and state regulation. Of course, academics are trained to be attuned to discordance and contradiction. Therefore, it is tempting to see friction and discordance in adjacent conceptual modalities. We suggest, however, that for market actors, the multiplicity of thought-forms in most exchanges are matter-of-factly accepted. Likewise, a general logic to markets or capitalism, as indicated earlier, is shaped by particular social relations.

To return to our volume, in David Rudner’s chapter, Chettiar bankers as deftly dole out capital along lines of affinal kinship as they litigate in colonial courts for delinquent loans. In Projit Mukharji’s chapter, Calcutta bazaar traders as readily channel occult forces as they broker consumer commodities. Finally, Sebastian Schweske’s contribution shows that Banaras lenders, of the street and in banks, cultivate idioms of respectability and trust alongside a mastery of ledger books. Thus, it is appropriate to say that proximate and periodically intersecting forms of knowing constitute *braided transactional epistemes*.³⁴ Rather than preserve a schism between abstract, written knowledge—such as the disciplines of economics or management—and lived, tactile forms of knowing developed through experience, we use the idea of *transactional epistemes* to equalize or flatten varied knowledge forms.³⁵ We seek, as it were, to de-hierarchize economistic modes as inherently impartial or objective, and to pluralize the concepts at play in exchange. These are thus not, as Mathew puts it, ‘incompatible’ forms of reason. Ideas of compatibility or complementarity take us back to the notion of ‘distinct ruptures’ and the ‘unfolding of a universal operational logic’, which Jan rightly dismisses as untenable in making sense of the genealogies of modern markets.

Following interpretations of Weberian ideas, calculative reasoning has long been fetishized as a rupture defining ‘modernity’ in economic behaviour.³⁶ Notwithstanding the ahistorical character of these Weberian interpretations as a ‘rupture’ of disenchantment, the critique of calculative reasoning—centring on such ‘unreasons’ as affect, emotion, and gut feeling—allows us to complement our understanding of the

³⁴For an analogue of epistemic ‘braiding’ in scientific and medical traditions on the subcontinent, see Projit Mukharji, *Doctoring traditions: Ayurveda, small traditions, and braided sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³⁵Pal Vik’s study of the impacts of computerization on the autonomy of British bank branch managers in decision-making processes since the 1960s, for instance, demonstrates one way in which the re-embedding of knowledge structures and shapes material economic relations, as does Arjun Appadurai’s study on the role of language in the production of derivatives trade—and its inherent cognitive limitations. Pal Vik, “‘The computer says no’: The demise of the traditional bank manager and the depersonalisation of British banking, 1960–2010”, *Economy and Society*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2017, pp. 231–249; Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on words: The failure of language in the age of derivative finance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³⁶See Gerd Gigerenzer, *Gut feelings: The intelligence of the unconscious* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

behaviour of market participants. It also helps us in making sense of what probably constitutes the most important ‘unreason’: a lack of choice and viable alternatives, both in the informational sense—when the lack of sufficient informational robustness acts as an impediment to calculative reasoning³⁷—and in the much more fundamental sense that is apparent on many labour markets where the need for subsistence overrides all other ‘reasons’.

Yet we also need to avoid essentializing this critique, and the idea of braided transactional epistemes helps us avoid it. Reasoning constitutes a crucial ingredient in most transactional arrangements—and it does so even where the reasoning is founded on ‘unreasons’ in the first place. Calculative reasoning often constitutes a method of choice even where the initial assumptions, given the lack of ‘perfect knowledge’ that characterizes most market interactions, out of necessity are based on leaps of faith.³⁸ Economic anthropology has long tended to stress elements of ‘divination’ and ‘magic’ that occur in economic behaviour, yet these technologies of imagination interact with calculation and reasoning, and should not be understood in isolation.³⁹ Witness the proliferation of conceptual modes among current-day Indian entrepreneurs. Astrologers, numerologists, and yogis abound in Indian markets—as they did in the nineteenth-century bazaar. Ideas of cosmic auspiciousness and harmony are at play alongside quantitative metrics and branding surveys.⁴⁰

It is not only forms of knowledge that are adjacent and braided, in social practice as much as in economic decision-making. Instead, reason and unreason need to be seen as much more proximate categories than they are normally made out to be. People tend to use them in braided fashions, adjusted to contextual parameters, and occasionally even in a manner that external observers would consider ‘unreasonable’. The question of where ‘reason’ starts, when it cannot be the outcome of perfect information, is deeply enmeshed with the braiding of transactional epistemes—and, in order to be communicated, all forms of knowledge rely on their representation and translation.

The market as an arena of representation and translation

A fascinating line of response from our reviewers, especially Mathew and Guérin, concerns the market as an *arena of representation and translation*. Those topics are self-evident to students of literature or philology. Notions of representation and translation initially seem out of place when looking at markets, suffused as they often are with talk of blunt materialism and quantitative projection. Yet as Mathew writes, the “‘market” is an extraordinarily multivalent term’ with abundant ‘semiotic proliferation’. What unfolds in exchange concerns not just supply and demand, or prices and production. It also concerns the navigation of meaning, which, as Jan discerns,

³⁷Alberto Corsín Jiménez, ‘Trust in anthropology’, *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2011, pp. 177–196.

³⁸Sebastian Schwecke, *Debt, trust, and reputation: extra-legal finance in northern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

³⁹Laura Bear, ‘Capitalist divination: Popularist speculators and technologies of imagination on the Hooghly river’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2015, pp. 408–423.

⁴⁰Chloe Cornish, “‘Bizarre” yogi scandal sheds light on India’s mystic advisers’, *Financial Times*, 19–20 February 2022, p. 10.

is central to livelihood and accumulation. At the heart of any market are processes of valuation and the handling of uncertainty. These processes, quite evidently, require intelligence, skill, and guile. To manoeuvre towards enhanced value and shield oneself against uncertainty entails, then, a facility in not just communication but also in translation.

Navigating markets necessarily rests both on the interpretation of the behaviour of strangers,⁴¹ and on the translative framework in which this behaviour can be made intelligible. This kaleidoscope of knowledge provides shortcuts through the complexity of human behaviour, consisting of metaphors for and categorizations of tools and resources, but also extending into the (sometimes rudimentary forms) of psychology familiar to students of business literature.

As Guérin notes, markets are ‘imbued with ... beliefs and representations of the world embedded in time and space’. This is true for the flash trader and commodity broker no less than the bazaar haggler and *mandi* broker. How communities imagine transactional activity, as much as how economists conceive of something called ‘national growth’, are outcomes of relational consensus and social complicity. This exists even at the most basic level: ‘modern’ forms of accounting, for instance, differ fundamentally from traditional South Asian *bahi* in the way they mark the segregation of ‘social’ from ‘economic’ expenses.⁴²

Marking a space distinct from business expenses for (among others) religious patronage or household reproduction considerably contributes to behavioural differences among Indian firms, small and big. Markets, as we have just described, are made through metaphors that guide commercial actors, as much as fragile ties and negotiated agreements.⁴³ Translations of knowledge are seamlessly interwoven in business practice with the world of assets and economic power that make up the ‘material’ realm of markets. Debates on the construction of property, like Nikhil Rao’s study of Bombay real estate markets in our book, show the extent to which even the supposedly simple act of owning an asset needs to be studied in ways that consider processes of translation and representation on markets in all their complexity.⁴⁴

If markets are, as Guérin puts it, ‘first and foremost an “exchange”’, we suggest that what is being exchanged goes beyond goods or services. It is goods and services braided

⁴¹See Paul Seabright, *The company of strangers: A natural history of economic life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴²On accountancy’s impact on the structure of family businesses, see C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen, and bazaars: North Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). On its role for scribal cultures in South Asian history, see the special issue ‘Munshis, pandits and record-keepers: Scribal communities and historical change in India’, including its introduction: Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook, ‘Introduction’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2010, pp. 441–443.

⁴³For example, in the Hindustani public sphere, ‘to feed and drink’ (*khilana-pilana*) refers to the process of paying off or ingratiating oneself with another authoritative actor, in commerce and in politics. To engage in ‘swap, exchange, give-and-take’ (*adal-badal*) may refer strictly to trade (*adala-badali*). But it borrows its affective charge from a figurative resonance, and denotes blood feuds, marriage transactions, and retributory killings. Finally, the metaphorical binary between raw/unsolid (*kachcha*) and cooked/solid (*pakka*) is used in market realms to refer to transactional intensity and influence, as in an established commission agent (*pakka arhatiya*) versus an inexperienced one (*kachcha arhatiya*).

⁴⁴See Chris Hann, ‘A new double movement? Anthropological perspectives on property in the age of neoliberalism’, *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 5, 2007, pp. 287–318.

with human representations which—in their proliferating fullness—are being swapped and sold, marketed and advertised. The connections one can mobilize, the charisma that one can demonstrate: markets are, as human entities, about selling and buying into a contingent worldview. Guérin notes how the volume demonstrates that economic categories are more a ‘system of representation’ than an ‘objective reality’. This is true whether we look at the fluidity and flexibility of property, or relations between debtors and creditors. The seeming impersonality of financial analytic methods, as well as the Chettiar parsing of social relationships in delegating loans, each demonstrate the pervasiveness of cultural and contractual conventions. This is what Guérin describes as a ‘common cognitive framework for understanding the world’.

As Guérin trenchantly writes, economistic modes of calculating gross domestic product or public debt are—no less than the bazaar grimoires and reputational registers in our volume—suffused by ‘arbitrary conventions and selective choices’ anchored in a ‘specific conception of the world’. The main difference lies not in their epistemic relativity but their authority. Apparently rational and objective modes of economic reasoning can be wielded in neoliberal policies to impose punitive austerity. Seemingly contextual and relative modes have less leverage over entire populations (yet nevertheless may be wielded in exploitative relations).

Exploring these nuances and insisting on their equivalently constructed and contingent nature was one of our ambitions. It may be part of the nineteenth-century legacy of the humanities and social sciences that historians and linguists and anthropologists are given a wide remit to explore the symbolic nuances of, for example, religion and sexuality. Markets have generally been seen as matter-of-fact entities undeserving of meaning-making probing. This may also be part of how the sphere of rational self-interest was, as Albert Hirschman put it in his classic study, parsed out from that of communal passion.⁴⁵ Whether it is a part of the university’s division of labour or the history of ideas, we can only agree that markets are conjunctures of the physical and material as well as imaginary and semiotic. Our volume bears the conviction that scholars across the humanities and social sciences should see transactional life as suffused by as many opportunities and vexations as other aspects of human existence.

If, as Guérin suggests, the market is a *system of representations*, and if, as many of our contributors show, it is a *system of reputations*, we come to the question of consensus. How do people come to shared agreement—if not lasting unanimity—on the protocols and predictions necessary for what we termed ‘contested’ markets? What are the fraught meanings and breakdowns of consensus—the stillborn and stalled aspects of exchange—that mark market evolution?

Bankruptcies, contractual disputes, accidents, theft, and all manner of *force majeure* constitute the impasses of market life. This is important to reflect upon for, as Guérin notes, exchange spurs many different intentions, motives, and desires. The actors in a give-and-take ‘obey multiple objectives’ at once. Extracting or redistributing value, eliminating or accommodating intermediaries, and stigmatizing groups (as well as struggling against stigma), are among the myriad goals in the mix.

⁴⁵ Albert Hirschman, *The passions and the interests: Political arguments for capitalism before its triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013 [1977]).

To take up one example, it is useful to underscore the complex registers of the term ‘speculation’. The working out of influence, reputation, technology, and force entail cost-benefit or risk-gain calculations. These realms are interwoven, and thus relate to questions of cultural competency and skewed interpretation. In markets, of all shapes and specifications—no less than while praying at the shrine, talking at the dinner table, and assessing marriage partners—motives are partial, information is constrained, and outcomes are uncertain.⁴⁶

In this sense, a market is a market when sufficient numbers of actors agree on payment, price, and contractual conventions, and collude to extract and distribute surplus. Markets are an always-contingent system of reality which—as humans rely on mental frameworks and abstract categories—is no less than language or religion discrepant to the materials and substance which constitute its focus. Just like the words we speak or the gods we pray to, every market is made up of conceptual projections embedded in reality—as long as we agree that it is so. The communication structures underlying exchange thus heighten the extent to which the contextual impinges on the transactional content.

Commercial context and content

Our reviewers note the dizzying array of forces involved in distribution, coordination, and extraction in modern India. Yang makes a useful distinction emerging from the volume between *context* and *content*. The structures or ‘context’ of transactions involve networks and institutions. The ‘content’ of market exchange involves—beyond commodities, prices, and interest—questions of law, procedure, morality, reputation, status, and dignity. In the everyday practice of exchange, context and content are frequently intertwined, to the extent that they are difficult to distinguish, and do not map onto a modernity-tradition binary. Yet this analytical distinction of domains helps considerably in making sense of markets.

Regarding the domain of context, Jan expresses one recurring insight from the volume: ‘it is the state’s desire for ordered and legible transactions and the peculiar modes of instituting these that created the grounds for the proliferation of informal economic activity’.⁴⁷ While non-formalized manners of doing business have historically been the norm rather than the exception, it was the ‘modern’ state’s intervention as a regulatory, ordering force that produced the binary of the (in)formal, in which what was left beyond the state’s purview became classified as the informal, being at once frequently desired as an arena of exploitation and undesirable from the perception of the party imposing order.

Indeed, our book has shown not only how the state’s legislative, executive, and judicial components mesh together, but also how they are subject to capture, work selectively, or fail in regulatory competence—or succeed in ways that, had the state some degree of consciousness, were ‘unintended’. Not only is the state collusive with non-state institutions, it also abets the proliferation of para-state spheres of exchange.

⁴⁶See the discussion of partial motives and uncertainty in moments of crisis in Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier, ‘Crisis, value, and hope: rethinking the economy’, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 55, supplement 9, 2014, pp. S4–S16.

⁴⁷See De, *A people’s constitution*.

When predatory processes catalysed by states are entangled with commercial transactions, informal and criminal markets are fostered, not contained, by regulation.⁴⁸ As Guérin confirms, regulation does not stymie but often ‘generates a parallel black market’. What seems to be stubbornly independent informality is in fact dialectically constituted vis-à-vis regulative authorities. Thus Mathew writes that ‘forms of exchange, distribution and coordination’ show ‘collaborative corruption, competitive collaboration, and diplomatic barter’.

Where, then, do we see the import of content? Guérin offers an incisive answer. What scholarship would we produce if we saw markets as not only about profit and loss, but also about the ‘permanent search for dignity, respect, and reputation’? As Guérin notes, ‘the overlap between credit and reputation’ runs through several of our chapters. This is something observed historically in Europe and India as well as at different levels in the contemporary age: at the level of the nation-state in terms of how central banks dwell on their credit ratings, and in companies, which care about shareholder value. As Guérin observes, ‘reputation and solvency tend to become one’, though rather than a flat correspondence, we stress, as indicated earlier, the heterogeneity of cultural components in market exchange. As the term ‘credit’ literally denotes, there are overlaps which allow for conversions between material and reputational wealth, but which also go beyond the immediate context of credit markets.

This discussion on conversion between material and reputational forms of wealth is furthered by Yang’s observation of objects having an ‘economic as well as social and moral value’.⁴⁹ As most objects do, this raises the question as to why some do not have an economic as well as non-economic value. Further, as Jan highlights, not just in India but throughout South Asia are grammars of credit such as one he describes, “‘*wihar*” (simultaneously denoting social standing and sound credit)’. What is of value, and its varying facets—material, emotional, symbolic, familial—is the core content of any exchange.⁵⁰

Here it is useful to bring the notion of quiddity into our discussion.⁵¹ We use this archaic term—meaning ‘the essence or particularity of a thing’—to refer to the imbrication of the material and the affective. The quiddity of food, real estate, and other commercially desirable goods rests on the way they condense the material and symbolic at once. We give things different names because of their various compositions of quiddity. In other words, the physical and the social are manifest in the quiddity of any marketized thing.

It is this holistic realm of content that underscores Guérin’s critique on the search for dignity. We need to pay more attention not just to relations of embedding and

⁴⁸See the range of tangled relations between criminal markets and state branches termed *intreccio* in Barbara Harriss-White and Lucia Michelutti (eds), *The wild East: Criminal political economies in South Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2019).

⁴⁹As a burgeoning scholarship on waste and its markets indicates, we might also focus on how certain public domains are deliberately evacuated of economic, moral, and social value. See Valerian Rodrigues, ‘Untouchability, filth, and the public domain’, in *Humiliation: Claims and context*, (ed.) Gopal Guru (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 108–123.

⁵⁰David Graeber, *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵¹Harriss-White, *India working*, pp. 208–209.

disembedding. More fundamentally, we cannot lose sight of how people are humanized and dehumanized in market transformations.

Here it is useful to point to one of the critiques, present—if more implicitly than explicitly—in Mathew and Jan's reviews. Just as we might have, in our chapters, further developed the distinction between the bazaar and market as transactional and physical spaces, we did not explore cases which examine the capacity of market exchange to render destitute and more vulnerable those already lacking purchasing power.⁵²

For example, we neglected wage workers in markets and marketplaces. Commodity markets necessarily involve labour markets; our volume did not engage with labour exploitation in such terms.⁵³ Ultimately, it is another research project to conceptualize how to 'weigh' different forms of economic and social authority as they entangle themselves in markets and other distributive relations. Indeed, thinking about such 'weightage' analytically, as a way to understand the pressure of varied extractive and distributive relations, would bring the market's consequences in people's lives more to the fore.

Conclusion

We come back to India's present market life, shaped, as in so many other countries, by the pandemic. The discussion here—on the *market as an analytical fetish*, on the *differentially embedded* character of the transactional, on the variety of *transactional epistemes*, on the forms of *representation and translation* suffusing interchanges, and on the *context and content* of exchange activity—has been amply evident in India since Covid became a global force in 2020. We have seen this in the insalubrious wheeling and dealing around medicines and treatment, both in the immense shocks and setbacks experienced by most of the population, who work in the informal sector, and in the way in which dense regulations and restrictions coexisted with furious speculative activity in basic goods and services.

In the five subthemes framing our response, we have sought to use the timeliness as well as the continuity evident in Indian market life over these pandemic years to respond to our reviewers and to take the scholarly conversation forward. In our discussion of the *market as an analytical fetish*, we have discussed our choice to use an admittedly imperfect term—one that carries significant normative baggage, but also informs people's self-understandings—to refer to a panoply of exchange and transactional activity. We have sought, in discussing *differential embeddedness*, to finesse our understanding of the dynamic entanglement between realms of the commercial and cultural. By elucidating *transactional epistemes*, we have put into the same horizon of authority and relativity the varied forms of knowing evident in market life. By discussing the *market as a domain of representation and translation*, we have pointed out the unpredictable desires and translations that saturate transactional life. And finally, in considering a market's *context and content*, we have simultaneously drawn attention to

⁵²The paradigmatic example of this would be the market-abetted Bengal Famine in the 1940s. See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

⁵³Barbara Harriss-White, 'Marx's merchants' capital: Researching agrarian markets in contemporary India', in *Marx in the field*, (ed.) Alessandra Mezzadri (London: Anthem, 2021), pp. 31–47.

the institutional and regulatory parameters, and symbolic and moral considerations, informing market life.


These dynamics will, in varying guises, be evident beyond South Asia. It is our hope that, despite the historical and political specificities delved into here, that scholars working on Southeast or Central Asia, as well as other parts of the post-colonial world, will find meaningful resonances. We must thank our incisive, rigorous reviewers, not just for elucidating and furthering the discussion from our volume, but also for their gift of fresh ideas that has prompted us to move our collective conversation forward.

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Real abstractions: Markets, moralities, and social segmentation in modern India

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Abstract

This introduction begins with a brief overview of the three major factors shaping economic life and exchange in India, as laid out by contributions in the edited volume *Rethinking Markets in Modern India*: embedded exchange, contested jurisdiction, and pliable markets. The overarching logic of all the contributions is that markets in India must be understood as path dependent, that is, expressing a historical trajectory and specific, and changing, political and moral regimes. The remainder of this introduction discusses the origins of the distinction between ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ in the nationalist critiques of empire and how these critiques have led to a widespread moral ambivalence vis-à-vis the commercialization of everyday life in India that persists today across the political spectrum.

Keywords: Markets; capital; exchange; India; community

*Rethinking Markets in Modern India*¹ is a major contribution to the understanding of how exchange, money, accumulation, and structures of trust and community intersect in contemporary India. It is a volume of lasting value to those interested in understanding the multiple dynamics and deeply segmented markets that constitute an enduring feature of the economic life in one of the major, if strikingly undercapitalized, economies in the world. The term ‘undercapitalized’ is usually applied by economists to entities that have not converted enough of its assets, or potential value, into a fluid and exchangeable form (shares, stock, credit, cash flow). Something similar could be said about many facets of India’s economy—the limited scale of formal banking and savings, the emerging real estate and land market, the dominance of petty trade and family businesses in retail and multiple other sectors.

The editors of this volume posit that three fundamental factors have shaped the Indian economy as it appears today: first, the tenacity and durability of a myriad

¹ Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas E. Haynes and Sebastian Schwecke (eds), *Rethinking markets in modern India: Embedded exchange and contested jurisdiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

forms of *embedded exchange*. This is Karl Polanyi's² term for the not-yet-abstracted forms of exchange and circulation that depend on local, and often bounded, parameters of trust and custom rather than on abstracted, fluid, and fully disembedded flows of capital and value across national and global economies. While Polanyi's distinction between embedded/disembedded have often been mapped onto other dualities such as modernity/tradition, formal/informal, and so on, the editors and many contributors to this volume demonstrate the value of understanding 'embedding' as a form of historical path-dependency, that is, how new economies and market segments were shaped, conditioned, but never fully determined by historical networks of community-trust, institutions, and legal frames. A pronounced example of this can be found in David Rudner's chapter on the banking practices of the Nattukottai Chettiar community across colonial South India and South East Asia. Another example is Nikhil Rao's incisive chapter on the legal and institutional legacies that have shaped the real estate market in Mumbai. Sebastian Schwecke's account of the conventions and evolution of registers of trust and reputation around informal finance in Banares since the late colonial era also demonstrates such complex continuities. Similarly, Douglas Haynes' account of what he calls 'vernacular capitalism', which emerged around small textile producers and their products in small towns across the Bombay presidency in the early twentieth century, demonstrate the enduring effects of such path-dependency.

The second factor is what the editors call *contested jurisdiction* which is defined as the continued existence of multiple registers of authority, also well beyond the state, and a fragmentation of regulatory interventions by various governmental authorities. As a result, the editors argue, 'rather than open friction between competing centers of authority, there is selective collusion and, indeed, selective scrutiny by the state in various manifestations' (p. 16). This creates an environment where economic activity depends on constant negotiation, mutual favours, and barely visible connections (*sifarish*) and where the boundary between the licit and illicit is less than clear, almost always depending on intervention or protection by elected politicians. Barbara Harris-White and J. Jeyaranjan's chapter on the 'sand mafias' operating in Tamil Nadu and Ajay Gandhi's analysis of the role of 'black money' in public discourse and in a Mumbai neighbourhood are perhaps the clearest illustrations of what forms of exchange, extraction, and accumulation are possible under such conditions of uncertainty and deep segmentation of trust. Several other contributions also revolve around the problems and possibilities of fragmented regulatory regimes: Mekhala Krishnamurthy's fascinating account of the history of regulations of agricultural market sites (*mandi*) in Madhya Pradesh demonstrate how farmers, state officials, and traders have wrangled over the control of prices, market access, and state procurement over many decades. The question of whether such *mandi* should remain under local control, versus plans to create larger, and supposedly freer, markets in agricultural produce was at the heart of the prolonged farmer's protests in North India in 2020–2021. The question of governmental control and regulation of trade is also at the heart of Aditi Saraf's chapter on the limited, and heavily scrutinized, trade across Kashmir's Line of Control, a trade that was initiated in 2008 as a 'confidence building measure' between Pakistan and India. Matthew Hull's intricate account of state lotteries in Punjab shows the state not only in

²Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation. Origins of our time* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944).

the role of regulator but actually as a provider of an infrastructure that initially sought to take over the illegal betting economy. Eventually, Hull shows, the state lottery began to act as a front for several illegal lottery operations, some of which originate in other states in India. Roger Begrich provides an account of the exchange of and transactions around alcohol among Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. He demonstrates how officials insert themselves into a customary medium of exchange and sociality through the taxation of 'foreign liquor' while prohibiting the commercial exchange of 'traditional' rice beer—mahua—ostensibly in an attempt to protect these communities from the effects of an open market.

The third factor sketched out by the editors is what they call *pliable markets*, that is, the adaptability of various market structures to conditions, commodities, and beliefs that seem rather far from the rational and individualized market agent that is the foundational figure (or fiction) of mainstream economic theory. Rather than suggesting that Indian markets are governed by irrational forces and undue secrecy—as was the standard critique of Indian economic behaviour by many colonial officers—several contributors show that markets in India are extraordinarily flexible and able to encompass commodities and knowledges that pervade the context in which they are embedded.

Projit Bihari Mukharji provides a fascinating account of what he calls the 'bazaar grimoire', that is, circulating texts and manuals that describe and offer 'occult technologies' that divine and interpret otherwise opaque relationships and forms of exchanges in bazaars in Bengal and Assam. Drawing on material from North Indian bazaars and markets, Andy Rotman contrasts what he calls 'brandism'—the global marketing of commodities as powerful brands that index the global power of the corporation behind it—with 'bazaarism', that is, the naming of goods and stores after divinities and virtuous personalities that index the piety and good reputation of the shopkeeper. Bazaars remain the most important sites of commodity exchange across much of India, and Rotman suggests that the model of trust and interpersonal accountability he identifies in the bazaar is still cherished and relied on by millions of Indians.

The richness and depth of the contributions in this volume illuminate how complex economic and exchange relations are in India and they also raise questions about whether the analytical categories, concepts, and distinctions that social scientists and historians deploy, including in this volume, are adequate to the task. The four very substantial commentaries that follow pose several questions along these lines. In the remainder of this Introduction I will briefly consider just two of the categories under discussion: first, the market as a social ideal of exchange that is haunted by uncertainty and moral ambiguity; and secondly, the unstable and morally charged status of money, both as floating cash but also as a measure of value.

As Johan Mathew and other commentators discuss so insightfully in their commentaries, the term 'market' may well be too imprecise, and too ideologically charged, to help us understand forms of exchange in India and elsewhere. The idea of the modern capitalist market and free trade as rational and peace-making structures—*doux commerce* in Montesquieu's terms—that promoted rational self-interest,³ emerged in

³See Albert Hirschman, *The passions and the interests: Political arguments for capitalism before its triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

the late eighteenth century. This idea was in stark tension with the monopolistic policies that were central to governance by the East India Company and other chartered companies pushing the expansion of the British empire and other European empires. Aiming at expanding the role of British interests across the subcontinent, colonial officials in India promoted reforms that would create larger and more fluid and abstract markets, codify private property, create a class of productive yeoman farmers, and facilitate capital accumulation.⁴ Indian forms of exchange and accumulation were almost invariably seen as too closed, opaque, and limited, held back by what colonial officials saw as irrational and 'clannish' impulses.⁵ For liberal-minded officials vested in creating a modern peasantry, the *bania* and the moneylender became symbols of the unproductive greed and unpredictability that governed the 'traditional' Indian economy. In the twentieth century, the Indian mainstream Left developed a very similar critique of conventional economic practices and advocated for a more rational and semi-planned economy.⁶

However, Indian nationalism was intellectually built on a critique of the modern capitalist markets that had drained India of capital, created predatory forms of exploitation, and introduced instrumentalized and monetized social relationships that many Indian nationalists portrayed as alien to Indian culture and values. The conceptual polarity between the 'economy' and 'culture' structured most nationalist discourse in colonial India: the former standing for rationality and modernity but also deracination, and the latter standing for 'tradition', cultural depth, and authenticity as antidotes to both capitalism and Western modernity. Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the world view of the colonized elite split between an 'outer world' of dominating power and economy, and an 'inner world' of sovereign cultural expression and domesticity succinctly expresses this conceptual matrix.⁷

The character of market exchange was central to each of these positions: to the progressive reformers, both colonial and post-colonial, the modern market was productive and rational but also a source of exploitation and inequality that had to be ameliorated and contained in order to protect the 'weaker sections'. For colonial officials, and later for policymakers in the post-colonial state, cooperatives of all kinds became an instrument to boost and protect socially marginal communities in an otherwise unforgiving market while also playing a valuable pedagogical part in producing new economic subjects less dependent on the parasitical figure of the *bania*.⁸ For those

⁴Ritu Birla, *Stages of capital: Law, culture, and market governance in late colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). See also A. K. Bagchi, 'Transition from Indian to British Indian systems of money and banking 1800–1850', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1985, pp. 501–519.

⁵Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From colonial economy to national space* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004). See also S. Schwecke, 'A tangled jungle of disorderly transactions? The production of a monetary outside in a North Indian town', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2017, pp. 1375–1419.

⁶Many of the policies that sought to 'discipline' the market in India around independence were rooted in wartime regulations. See, for instance, Rohit De, '"Commodities must be controlled": Economic crimes and market discipline in India (1939–1955)', *International Journal of Law in Context*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2014, pp. 277–294.

⁷Partha Chatterjee, 'Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: The contest in India', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, pp. 622–633.

⁸Rita Rhodes, *Empire and co-operation: How the British empire used co-operatives in its development strategies, 1900–1970* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2012). Nikolay Kamenov, 'The place of the "cooperative" in the agrarian history of India, c.1900–1970', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2020, pp. 103–128. Efforts by

defending cultural values, local or national, the modern market, modern industrial labour relations, and consumer culture threatened to hollow out and destroy an older culture of trust, reputation, and community-based networks and replace it with individualized consumer desires, beholden to (disembedded) global cultural flows and alienated from Indian forms of sociality. For several decades, the protected and limited markets of the Licence Raj managed to encompass both of these views of the (im)moralities of market exchange. Today, after the extensive market reforms of the 1990s, one finds variations of this moral critique of the modern market alive among many older cadres of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as well as among many Gandhian and progressive social activists across India.

This brings us to the question of money as the mediator of exchange relations in both modern capitalist markets and in bazaar economies. As Ajay Gandhi points out in his chapter, 'black money' has for many decades been deployed in public debates in India as a broad label for all kinds of illicit activities, corruption, and tales of ill-gotten wealth. If black money is money 'gone bad' because of its improper/illegal origins, it raises the broader question of the moral status of money as a medium of exchange. In their classic volume *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, Bloch and Parry observed that the distinction between modern, monetized economies and non-monetary (traditional) economies is not at all clear. All exchange, including gift exchange, is uncertain and fraught with moral danger. Exchange, even of the most informal kind, is also always governed by a set of tacit or explicit rules and assumptions about the proper relationship between people, things, and value.⁹ The heterodox Marxist philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel suggested many decades ago that the exchange of objects and value form the basis of materially anchored 'real abstractions' of many kinds in all societies. However, the emergence of capitalism and modern commodities allow money to be not only an equivalent of value, but a 'general equivalent', that is, the potential measure and mediator of all social relationships.¹⁰ Modern money produces alienation in both senses of the term—as making everything alienable and thus exchangeable, and as estranging social life from itself by injecting calculability and self-interest into the equation. It is precisely the potential for complete abstraction and disembedding from context and origin that makes modern money so morally fraught—no more so than cash, a form of money that is unmarked by origin (does not smell, as the saying goes) and signifies pure potential and therefore also temptation and vice.

Modern India abounds with ambivalences about money and worries about its corrosive effect on cultural values and social relations. Money can be purified and made moral by honest work, legal regulation, or religious piety. At the same time, many Indians across community and class remain sceptical and ambivalent about how the commercialization and monetization of social life seem to upend established hierarchies and customs, including hierarchies of taste and propriety. One can think of the persistent critique from many quarters of the escalating cost and opulence of Indian

anthropologists like Verrier Elwin gave cooperatives a central role in the policies protecting tribal zones in areas defined by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. See, for instance, Debar Commission, *The Scheduled Area and Scheduled Tribes Commission* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1961).

⁹Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (eds), *Money and the morality of exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁰Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and manual labour: A critique of epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

weddings, fuelled by excessive cash flow. Or how the increased monetization of dowry payments is widely blamed for an increasing instrumentalization of marriage arrangements, while also levelling the symbolic playing field for communities not previously included in a larger cultural economy of prestige and prestation.

In the English language, the terms ‘property’ and ‘propriety’ have the same root. This reflects the historical emergence of commercialism and possessive individualism as moralizing forces that would turn every object and relation into orderly ones. In modern India the relationship between property and propriety is far from settled. The question of what a market is, how exchange should be properly conducted, and how far one should accept and embrace the force of law and the temptation of money are burning everyday issues for many individuals and communities. The editors of *Rethinking Markets in Modern India* have enabled us all to have a deeper and more historically attuned understanding of the braiding of multiple practices, conventions, rationalities, and moral regimes in India’s economic and cultural life.

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REVIEW ARTICLE

The fetish in the market

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Abstract

This review article on *Rethinking Markets in Modern India*¹ uses the notion of the fetish as an entry point to consider the rich and innovative arguments put forward in this volume. It also interrogates ‘the market’ as a conceptual grounding for understanding India’s political economy in the past and present.

Keywords: Markets; commodity; fetishism

There is probably no Marxist concept that has enraptured humanists quite as powerfully as that of commodity fetishism. In *Capital*, Marx famously observed that in a system of market exchange, social relations between people assume the fantastic form of commodities that autonomously relate to each other.² Commodities become fetishes or idols in that they appear to exert power over consumers, they compete with each other for market share, they demand certain amounts of money as payment. Indeed, they *seem* to exert agency.

Marx turns mildly apoplectic at the suggestion of agentive commodities, insisting that behind the illusion of commodity fetishes lie relations of socio-economic class that powerfully determined the price of commodities, the transactions in the market, and the profits of capital. Most pertinent in the context of the book under review, commodity fetishism forms part of Marx’s critique of the naturalization of the self-regulating market. Political economists, beginning in the eighteenth century, wrote of the market as natural, of competition as inevitable, and, most famously, of the ‘invisible hand of the market’ that guided self-interested actors to optimize social good.³ Indeed, we might say that there is a fetishization not merely of commodities but also of the market

¹ Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas E. Haynes and Sebastian Schwecke (eds), *Rethinking markets in modern India: Embedded exchange and contested jurisdiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A critique of political economy*, (trans.) Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 163–177.

³ Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, (ed.) Edwin Cannan (London: Methuen and Co., 1904); Marx, *Capital*, p. 175.

itself. In a capitalist economy the market exerts power over consumers, producers, and middlemen. It enriches and bankrupts, expands and contracts—the market actually acts. Or does it?

Karl Marx insisted on the centrality of history and human society in his analysis of markets. He resolutely sought to reinsert humans and human history into a political economy that was obsessed with the discovery of ‘natural laws’. He was consequently forced to turn to metaphors of fetishes and vampires to capture the inhumanity of the political economy he was critiquing.⁴ If Marx is invoked only in passing in *Rethinking Markets in Modern India*, I found fetishism to be a useful framework for understanding this volume as a whole. There is a certain danger of Orientalism in invoking fetishes to understand markets in India, falling back upon hoary tropes of religion and caste to explain everything that happens in the subcontinent. But the complex and careful contributions to this volume steer clear of this problem and so I feel confident in highlighting how they expose the socio-political relations that are elided in the discourse of markets. Through fine-grained examination of how exactly exchanges are organized, and the socio-political mechanisms that undergird those exchanges, the authors reveal what is so often occluded in the triumph of the neoliberal market.

In reviewing an edited volume of scholarship, it is impossible to do justice to the richness of each contribution. In the introduction the editors themselves refuse to enforce a homogenous framework on these diverse essays, and I do not claim to do so here. Rather, in this review article I hope to tease out—perhaps even impose—an analysis of fetishism that emerges from these chapters. The essays in this volume intersect with the notion of fetishism in multiple and overlapping ways but in the interests of simplicity I will discuss them in four groups. The first takes the notion of the fetish almost literally, exploring how certain commodities exert social power. The second group of chapters is tied together by the depiction of commodity exchange not just as embedded in but actually structured and regulated by social relations of caste, class, and community. The third group looks at physical markets and their relationship to the abstract market. The final set of chapters pushes into the terrain where the market becomes an almost free-floating signifier, but one that insidiously frames how we understand a broader tapestry of exchanges, appropriations, and distributions. Finally, I conclude by speculating on where this analysis of fetishism leads us in thinking about markets.

Marx coined the phrase ‘commodity fetish’ to critique classical political economists by showing them to be just as primitive and superstitious as the supposedly backward inhabitants of Africa or Oceania. ‘Commodity fetishism’ was an insult; framed by someone who saw himself as more scientific in his analysis of political economy and who assumed that it was an absurdity to imagine that a thing could wield social power. At least some of the authors in this volume reject this presumption and insist on taking seriously the work of fetishes.

Projit Mukharji quite literally explores the use of fetishes in the market, by analysing occult manuals for achieving commercial success. In giving due respect to the world view of occult practitioners, he reveals how the world of a Bengali store-keeper extends far beyond the market (pp. 95–97, 105–106). Similarly, Roger Begrich’s

⁴Marx, *Capital*, p. 342.

chapter provides a rich ethnography of alcohol in an Adivasi community. In respecting the beliefs of his interlocutors, he reveals how alcohol is the physical conduit of social connection. Ties of communal obligation are secured through the hospitality of rice beer, and the continuing power of dead ancestors is acknowledged through drinking practices (pp. 324–326). Both these chapters then reject commodity fetishism as an insult and take seriously the social power of fetish objects. In doing so, they offer a critique of markets as sites of rational calculation by demonstrating how actors engage in exchanges through a quite incompatible form of reason.

Post-modern theorists have argued that in the twentieth century commodity fetishism exceeded Marx's original formulation: their analysis reveals how modern advertisers deploy messages of fetishistic power to sell commodities.⁵ Commodities are often marketed not for their explicit use-value, but as aids to increasing social status or attracting sexual partners. Furthermore, American historians have traced the central role of patent medicines (often of dubious pharmaceutical value) in pioneering modern advertising.⁶ Douglas Haynes' chapter on advertising pharmaceuticals for sexual ailments sidesteps questions of physiological efficacy and leaves the reader to imagine the more prurient details of these commodities. Instead, he analyses how newspaper advertising allowed manufacturers to convey magical promises directly to consumers and bypass networks of peddlers, retailers, and traditional medical authorities (p. 118). Nevertheless, these pharmaceuticals are particularly fetish-like commodities that are able to evade the normal price competition of markets. Yet, unlike Andy Rotman's jute bags (discussed below), they have the charisma to break through traditional forms of exchange and create modern disintermediated markets.

All of the contributors to this volume provide empirically rich accounts that convey an almost tactile sense of how exchanges are organized. Yet, I read in these three chapters a particular emphasis on the fetishistic quality of particular commodities, and the apparent or actual agentive quality of these objects. This recalls the large literature known variously as Actor-Network Theory, Assemblage Theory, or the New Materialism. Elsewhere both Mukharji and Matthew Hull engage this literature, but it is mostly absent in this book.⁷ While there are plenty of reasons to reject this particular analytical framework, much of the analysis here might have been enriched by a deeper engagement with this scholarship. This theoretical literature and the chapters in this volume both remind us that markets cannot be fully comprehended except through fine-grained examination of fetish-like objects and the specific ways in which they interact with people in the marketplace.

Actor-Network Theory has been much derided for the suggestion that objects have agency, but its emphasis on tracing networks is less controversial and has a broader

⁵Jean Baudrillard, *The consumer society: Myths and structures* (London: Sage, 1998); Guy Debord, *Society of the spectacle* (Bread and Circuses Publishing, 2012); Sut Jhally, *The codes of advertising: Fetishism and the political economy of meaning in the consumer society* (New York: Routledge, 2014); see also Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁶Jackson Lears, *Fables of abundance: A cultural history of advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

⁷Projit Bihari Mukharji, 'Occulted materialities', *History and Technology*, vol. 34, no. 1 (March 2018), pp. 31–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2018.1516851>; Matthew Stuart Hull, *Government of paper: The materiality of bureaucracy in urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

genealogy. In this volume, the editors frame these networks as ‘embedded exchange’. Drawing on the classic work of Karl Polanyi (though interestingly not the social network analysis of Mark Granovetter⁸), this volume explores the complex social worlds that shape and regulate economic exchanges. We might also frame these discussions of embedded exchange as uncovering what Marx saw as commodity fetishism: it is, in fact, complex relationships between people that only *appear* as relations between things in the market.

Anthropologists of Oceania and Africa have sustained a long and distinguished tradition of investigating how economies are deeply imbricated in relations of gender, culture, and politics, but this tradition is somewhat sparse in anthropologies of South Asia. David Rudner’s pioneering work on the Chettiar diaspora is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. Rudner updates his scholarship here in conversation with Geertz’s conceptualization of the bazaar, but ultimately reaffirms his argument that caste structures were the central regulatory mechanism of interest rates for Chettiar bankers.⁹ Thus, despite the deep penetration of European capital into South and Southeast Asia by the early twentieth century, Rudner shows that capital markets were not disembedded from religion or culture. Sebastian Schwecke turns to the terra firma of North India but similarly finds that banks obtained deposits and lent capital based on personal reputation rather than a Weberian kind of trust that inhered in bureaucratic procedures (pp. 151–152, 168–170). Both these histories powerfully demonstrate how modern capital markets were merely a façade undergirded by durable personal relationships.

Ajay Gandhi is concerned less with finance and more with the spectral qualities of a certain kind of money. His fascinating ethnography of black money notes the discourse of black money as a fetish object that causes moral corruption. Yet his ethnography turns away from the currency notes themselves and traces the circulation of black money to demonstrate how actors mobilize this money to construct and sustain social networks (p. 281). Gandhi’s chapter resonates with Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism—though Marx himself might have been frustrated with the inattention to the ways in which these circuits sustain class divisions and exacerbate inequality. Andy Rotman is similarly intrigued by the spectral iconography of *jhola* bags in the Benares bazaar, but ultimately finds that the graphic symbolism of these commodities seems to have less power than social relationships. Apparent efforts to engender a neoliberal brand identity are read by shoppers as little more than a vague gesture towards foreignness (pp. 247–249). Both these wonderful ethnographic accounts consequently detail the persistent power of social connections in late capitalist India.

Neoliberal capitalism is often depicted by social theorists as insidious and unstoppable, but through careful empirical analysis these scholars suggest otherwise. Even in finance, the most abstracted and globalized sector of capitalism, the imperative of capital to reproduce itself must occur within the furrows ploughed by cultural norms and social hierarchies. Indeed, money, far from flattening social networks, is mobilized to

⁸Mark Granovetter, ‘Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 91, no. 3 (1 November 1985), pp. 481–510.

⁹David West Rudner, *Caste and capitalism in colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); David Rudner, ‘Banker’s trust and the culture of banking among the Nattukottai Chettiars of colonial South India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (January 1989), pp. 417–458.

embed markets more deeply into the social world. Marx (and Engels) predicted that the cash nexus would dissolve the rich texture of social relations into the naked exploitation of the free market, and these chapters masterfully reveal how this has not come to pass.

'Market' is an extraordinarily multivalent term. It refers to a physical space where buyers encounter sellers, a building that houses shops, a single retailer with a wide selection of goods, the effort to find and entice consumers, the aggregate demand for a particular commodity, an abstract ideal that structures a system of political economy, and more. I am certainly guilty of using the term without giving sufficient attention to its myriad and often conflicting meanings. Moreover, in this semiotic proliferation there is relatively little examination of the extent to which physical spaces of exchange conform to the abstract theories of social scientists.

Of the chapters in *Rethinking Markets*, only Mekhala Krishnamurthy's chapter examines a market in this literal sense. Krishnamurthy traces the regulatory history of *mandis* (primary agricultural produce markets) and the ways in which participants in a particular *mandi* respond to these regulations. Shifts in the technologies of measurement as well as the caste identity and political allegiances of market participants seem to matter more than legislation. In this telling, regulation is not so much imposed on markets as it constitutes an infrastructure that is contested by socio-political networks (pp. 203–204). By focusing on the materiality of this particular *mandi*, Krishnamurthy's startlingly timely research reveals that the regulatory fetish of the free market obscures the continuing ability of privileged actors to control actual markets.

If Krishnamurthy's chapter explores regulatory efforts to improve the design of a market, Nikhil Rao recounts the effort to simultaneously create a market almost ex nihilo, including the effort to invent the property traded within it. Rao traces the history of urban real estate in colonial Bombay to uncover the surprisingly ambivalent relationship of colonial rulers to private property and free markets. Indeed, the halting progress in commoditizing land was due in part to resistant tenants, but also to the erratic and contradictory desires of the government itself (p. 70). Rao's history importantly details how physiocratic theories of political economy played a key role in creating an urban property market, but also how these theories foundered on the soil and stone of this island city.

Both these chapters draw our attention to the gap between 'the market' and actual marketplaces. Economic sociologists interested in the 'performativity of economics' and 'social studies of finance' have been exploring this relationship between the abstraction and the physical infrastructure of markets. In studying the corporeal arrangement of buyers and sellers, the visual interface of Bloomberg terminals, or the geographic proximity of hard drives to market servers, these scholars have started to unpack the ways in which the materiality of markets influence their ostensible freedom and efficiency.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this scholarship mostly neglects markets

¹⁰Michel Callon (ed.), *The laws of the markets* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review, 1998); Donald A. MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa and Lucia Siu (eds), *Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniel Beunza, Iain Hardie and Donald MacKenzie, 'A price is a social thing: Towards a material sociology of arbitrage', *Organization Studies*, vol. 27, no. 5 (May 2006), pp. 721–745; Alan P. Kirman and Nicolaas J. Vriend, 'Learning to be loyal: A study of the Marseille fish market', in *Interaction and Market Structure*, (eds) Domenico Delli Gatti, Mauro Gallegati and Alan P. Kirman (Berlin: Springer, 2000), pp. 33–56.

outside the North Atlantic, and would be enormously enriched by this research on South Asia.

This brings us to a final group of chapters that examine forms of exchange, distribution, and coordination that perhaps should not be called markets. Krishnamurthy and Rao push us to consider how governments regulate and create actual markets. In the chapters written by Barbara Harriss-White and J. Jeyaranjan, Matthew Hull, and Aditi Saraf, items of value are exchanged and money is extracted, but these bear scant resemblance to the abstract model of markets that reigns in neoclassical economics.

Harriss-White and Jeyaranjan treat the reader to an unexpected history of state capture in which the high costs of democratic party politics are paid for with the expropriation of common resources. A vast web of coercion and corruption extends its reach to ensure the preservation of this monopoly power (pp. 353–358). While there is a market for commoditized sand once it is extracted, the licence to extract sand from riverbeds is a monopoly fiercely protected against anything like market forces. This remarkable and depressing narrative conveys just how plural and porous the state is to the profit motive.

Hull similarly looks to who profits from state monopolies. This chapter draws a wonderfully rich portrait of three interdependent lotteries competing for customers in Punjab. Illegal lotteries depend on the transparency and physical paper receipts of regulated lotteries, while the regulation of legal lotteries leads to a dependence on illegal lotteries to actually draw in punters (pp. 317–319). This is in many ways a perfect expression of a neoliberal logic in which the governments are defunded and then required to compete with private enterprises to become the most efficient exploiter of working-class bettors.

Finally, Saraf's chapter on the cross-Line of Control trade would be comical if it were not shadowed by the violence of Indian-occupied Kashmir. It is indeed a dark parody of markets to witness the Sisyphean efforts to prevent peace-building exchanges from crystallizing into trade that acknowledges sovereignty (pp. 220–225). These are exchanges that do not involve money, and have enormous obstacles to financing, physical proximity, and even communication. In fact, it emerges as a kind of political theatre closer to rituals of diplomatic gifting than capitalist markets.

While the term 'market' appears in the titles of each of these chapters, I do not think it is a particularly important concept in their analysis. Indeed, each of them opens up new perspectives on what the editors call 'contested jurisdiction', in that bureaucracies are divided and compete with each other and with private actors to regulate and extract revenues from economic exchanges. Moreover, these works are most clearly situated in a neoliberal present where markets *seem* to have consumed the state. However, one might question the extent to which the language of markets is obstructing their nuanced descriptions of collaborative corruption, competitive collaboration, and diplomatic barter.

I also sensed under the surface of these wonderful accounts, a critique of 'the state' that shares much with Foucault's genealogy of governmentality.¹¹ These are all quite

¹¹Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, (ed.) Michel Senellart, (trans.) Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007); Timothy Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, no. 1 (March 1991),

brilliant works of political economy, but I worry that in framing them as studying markets, we run the danger of slipping into a neoliberal language that sets an idealized free market as the standard against which every aspect of human society is measured and found wanting. Indeed, it seems to me that this research gives vital insights into modes of governing exchange and extraction in India, and how these often look nothing like a market.

It seems rather hypocritical for someone who wrote a book with 'market' in the title to critique another for using the term. But in fact, reading this volume has pushed me towards an auto-critique, and a reconsideration of the conceptual work that 'the market' does, even when we do not want it to. Many terms can be conceptually powerful but also act as labels that occlude insight. Frederick Cooper has made vital theoretical interventions by demolishing grand theoretical concepts like globalization or modernization through a careful evaluation of the history of Africa.¹² His deep empiricism conveys how theoretical concepts, especially when loosely deployed, can form cataracts in our vision of the world. India might provide the empirical grounds for a similar analysis and critique of the concept of 'the market'.

Markets conjure an abstract vision of sellers competing among themselves and also with buyers until all agree on an equilibrium price for a specified commodity. This is of course a fiction that never actually occurs in the real world, and yet its assumptions about competition, price setting, efficiency, and the free flow of information increasingly structure the ways we think about all forms of exchange, exploitation, and distribution—even theft. This volume, rather than making me rethink markets, has made me wonder whether we should not avoid thinking with the concept of markets.

To be fair, most of the contributors to this volume are not engaging with the market as a concept; rather, it serves as a convenient umbrella term for the diverse set of vaguely economic practices they examine. There are numerous other concepts that are present under the surface in these chapters that might have been brought to the forefront: gift exchange and trade, social class and inequality, property rights and consumerism. One can hardly fault the editors for using markets in what is always a thankless task of enforcing unity upon diverse scholarly projects. Nevertheless, I fear that the market is doing unseen conceptual work because it leads to presumptions of a separation between state and market or society and market. The marvellous achievement of this volume is that it explodes these spurious distinctions.

Again and again, the contributors to this volume trace the ways in which exchange and exploitation occur within and through socio-political terrains and how those terrains are carved by and inextricable from value extracted, commodities exchanged, and property consumed. Long ago Marx critiqued the fetishism of markets because it elided the active cooperation between bourgeois capitalists that was the true engine

pp. 77–96; Ritu Birla, *Stages of capital: Law, culture, and market governance in late colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹²Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian's perspective', *African Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 399 (2001), pp. 189–213; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in question: Theory, knowledge, history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); see also J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

of state power.¹³ These chapters richly demonstrate not only how markets are constituted by complex assemblages of socio-political actors, but that ordinary Indians can see right through the spell of market fetishism.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹³Karl Marx, 'The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, (ed.) Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), pp. 594–617.

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Rethinking markets to rethink economics

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The edited volume *Rethinking Markets in Modern India*¹ offers a fresh and stimulating look at the day-to-day fabric and running of markets in the Indian context, both past and present. Much more broadly, it is a solid contribution to the conceptualization of markets as a material, social, moral, political, and unequal process, and not as an abstract concept and a normative ideal. Yet the idea of the market as an abstract concept and as an economically and morally superior reality remains the foundation of neoclassical economics. And neoclassical economics tends to be increasingly hegemonic, both in terms of research and teaching. India is no exception.² The rich tradition of plural economics schools of thought has been constantly challenged since the neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s, and this is even more the case with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in 2014.³

Neoclassical economics conceptualizes the market as an abstract mechanism, which results from the confrontation of supply and demand between two types of actors—producers and consumers—who are assumed to be equal, rational, and seeking to maximize their individual interests. Moreover, neoclassical economics considers the ‘perfect’ market as the most efficient and fairest mechanism for allocating resources. Even though various branches of neoclassical economic theory have developed sophisticated models that relax certain assumptions, the market as the optimal and fairest mode of resource allocation remains prevalent. Of course, any theory aims at a

¹Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas E. Haynes and Sebastian Schwecke (eds), *Rethinking markets in modern India: Embedded exchange and contested jurisdiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²Rethinking Economics India Network, ‘Pluralism in economic education. A review of undergraduate programs in India’ (New Delhi: Curriculum Reform Project, 2022).

³Sudipta Bhattacharyya et al., ‘Economics education in India. From pluralism to neo-liberalism and to “Hindutva”’, in *Advancing pluralism in teaching economics* (London: Routledge, 2018).

stylized and abstract representation that results from a simplification of reality. But when theory considers its models as a faithful representation of reality and uses them to develop economic policies and advise decision-makers, then this becomes extremely problematic.⁴ This is why a detailed empirical analysis of the making and day-to-day life of markets is crucial—and that is what this book offers.

The discussion proposed here does not pretend to summarize the volume. It is simply impossible to do justice to the diversity of arguments, regions, sectors, and periods of history explored by the various authors. More modestly, I take some of the arguments, especially those offered in its introduction, and suggest some openings by referring to other recent research, in India but also elsewhere, and with a focus on my own field of expertise—debt and finance.

Empirical richness

The book draws on fine-grained explorations of field realities. Empirical richness is undoubtedly the first strength of the book. The reader discovers the account books of Tamil Chettiar bankers of pre-colonial India and the various techniques—financial, social, and moral—deployed to forge an efficient and powerful transnational financial community. Also in pre-colonial India, the reader is introduced to print advertising, the precursor of contemporary mass media, whose role was central in shaping ‘vernacular’ firms, local distribution networks embedded in specific local realities, and a new form of small-scale industrial capitalism. In the contemporary era, the reader continues to explore various market devices, from the grimoires and amulets of contemporary bazaars to the massive use of icons of divinity in building the reputation of bazaar vendors, from the disruptions caused by the introduction of electronic balances in agricultural markets to the crucial role of gossiping in shaping lenders’ and debtors’ reputations. The ‘morality of exchange’⁵ appears forcefully: where to sell (or buy); to whom; at what price; when, what, and how to pay; what records to keep of the transactions: all these questions obey precise cultural and moral norms set in time and space. Very clearly, markets appear to be both ‘moralized and moralizing’ (p. 236).

The reader becomes familiar with the complexities and intricacies of market jurisdictions: housing and the multiple and changing meanings of the very definition of ‘property’; the numerous and changing authorities that organize, structure, and control the purchase and sale of agricultural products; the multiple definitions of legal and illegal alcohol; how the regulation of lotteries inadvertently creates the conditions for various illegal activities; and finally, sand, where the state itself is the conductor of illegal extractivism and the rule of law seems to have lost all legitimacy. The sand

⁴William Lazonick, *Business organization and the myth of the market economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Mariana Mazzucato, *The value of everything: Making and taking in the global economy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).

⁵Maurice Bloch and Jonathan P. Parry (eds), *Money and the morality of exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

market appears as the archetypal criminalized market, now a central feature of the contemporary Indian economy and democracy.⁶

The inadequacy of neoclassical economics

This thick description of concrete markets shows the inadequacy of the assumptions of neoclassical economics. Markets are not the meeting place of supply and demand, but first and foremost an ‘exchange’, as two of the four editors emphasize in a solid introduction that puts into perspective some of the threads of the book. It is first and foremost this exchange, imbued with morality, sociality, and power, as well as beliefs and representations of the world embedded in time and space, that shape the content and the nature of each and every market. The protagonists of market exchanges are not ‘homo economicus’ seeking to maximize their self-interest, nor ‘homo collectivus’ manipulated by the community or tradition (an equally problematic interpretation). The protagonists of markets are not reduced to a producer and a consumer (or a creditor and debtor). They include a wide variety of actors such as law enforcement, henchmen, intermediaries, or owners. All of them are first and foremost social and moral beings, filled with rights and obligations, juggling the search for accumulation or simply their survival, on the one hand, with the endless search for dignity, respect, and reputation, on the other.

The ‘self-regulation of markets’, another normative precept of neoclassical economics—which is supposed to lead to a fairer and efficient, morally and economically superior society—is also being shattered. Not only is the state instrumental in shaping market rules and often complicit in illegal and illicit markets, but ‘multiple sovereignties rather than a unitary state frame transactions culture in India’ (p. 14). These multiple sovereignties are sometimes contradictory, sometimes competitive, and obey multiple objectives: to control, to extract value (whether in the form of rents or taxes), to eliminate intermediaries, to moralize, and to discriminate against specific segments of the population (cf. the specific regulation of artisanal alcohol of the Adivasis in Jharkhand). This ‘baroque complexity’ (p. 16) engenders processes through which various sorts of jurisdiction overlap, sometimes resulting in conflict, where legal and state regulation often create the conditions for illegality, and where state regulation sometimes takes the form of its absence.

The various chapters offer telling examples of this ‘baroque complexity’: how the constitution of urban property as a market draws on overlapping jurisdictions where multiple forms of pre-colonial and colonial land are stacked and articulated; how the state, through the diversity of its entities and administrations, both redistributes through the food ration shops while organizing its own levies on this redistribution; how legal lotteries desperately need illegal lotteries for their own functioning; how the central state regulation of sand extraction is gradually turning into unbridled extractivism orchestrated by the ruling parties for their own financing; and how legal regulation is doomed to failure since it applies to the departments that are the primary violators of the law.

⁶ Lucia Michelutti et al., *Mafia Raj: The rule of bosses in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Barbara Harriss-White and Lucia Michelutti, *The wild East: Criminal political economies in South Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2019).

This baroque complexity reveals an ambiguous, shifting reality, where relations between market protagonists are sometimes made up of conflict and combat and sometimes of complicity and collaboration, such as the solidarity between bureaucrats and populations or the collaboration between competing political parties to share the rent from sand plundering.

From these first two observations—embedded exchanges and contested jurisdictions—a third results: ‘Pliable markets’. Indeed, different chapters show how markets are constantly transforming, adapting, and reconfiguring themselves. Markets offer a ‘remarkable plasticity’ and this plasticity is both shaped by and constitutive of political stakes, ethical and moral norms, and social relations.

The narrowness and arbitrariness of economic categories

Indirectly, and echoing a long tradition of economic anthropology,⁷ the chapters highlight the narrowness and arbitrariness of economic categories, which are more a matter of a system of representation than of objective reality. This is very clear in the case of property, whose definition ‘remains fluid and flexible’ (p. 82). It is also the case for finance. From the Chettiers of pre-colonial India to contemporary informal lenders, finance appears to be more than a monetary transaction between a debtor and a creditor, but imbued with social and moral significance. Chettiar bankers scrupulously noted in their account books the amount of each transaction and also the nature of the social relationship with their borrowers, savers, or financiers. They distinguished kin from non-kin, affinal relatives from lineage clan, locals from strangers, themselves differentiated between Asian and European. For today’s informal lenders, the social cost of debt (and conversely its social profitability) appears to be just as important as its financial cost, for both the lender and the borrower. The reputation of the lender relates to his capacity to reschedule and to make moratoria in case of difficulty. The borrower’s reputation relates to their ability, not necessarily to pay on time, but to communicate possible repayment difficulties.

The editors suggest that this book ‘perceives capitalism’s unfolding from fresh angles that, in turn, may facilitate reevaluations of markets in Europe and North America’ (p. 3). They are perfectly right, although they do not give further details. The so-called ‘objective’ methods used by financial analysts to assess the ‘real value’ of companies are no more ‘rational’ than doing a puja, reciting a mantra, or offering alcohol to a deity. Sophisticated financial analytic methods simply act as a convention, a common cognitive framework for understanding the world.⁸ The methods of calculating GDP, public debt, and inflation—all expected to give an ‘objective’ account of a country’s wealth, obligations, and prices—also obey a multitude of arbitrary conventions and selective choices which in turn are based on and convey a specific conception

⁷Jane I. Guyer, ‘Endowments and assets: The anthropology of wealth and the economics of intrahousehold allocation’, in *Intrahousehold resource allocation in developing countries*, (eds) J. Haddad, J. Hoddinott and H. Alderman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 112–129.

⁸Horacio Ortiz, ‘The limits of financial imagination: Free investors, efficient markets, and crisis’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 116, no. 1 (2014), pp. 38–50.

of the world.⁹ They are not false, but they are no more ‘objective’ than the account books of Chettiar bankers when they distinguished between their partners based on kinship, clan, or territorial ties.

It is also worth noting that in the current context of financialization, the overlap between credit and reputation, considered the ‘main asset’ of sellers, creditors, and debtors (this argument runs through several chapters of the book) is back in the news. Already noted by Bayly in his famous history of Bānāras bazaars,¹⁰ this is mentioned by several authors. The overlap was also at the heart of the expansion of markets in pre-modern Europe.¹¹ Contemporary financialized capitalism and its speculative functioning bring back to the forefront the crucial role of solvency and reputation.¹² States are now more concerned about the level of their public debt and their rating than about their true level of production or the unemployment rate, and companies are more concerned about their attractiveness to shareholders than about their true value. Individuals are now in dire need of debt to make ends meet and to care for their children and pay for their education. Here again, and with the introduction of sophisticated credit rating algorithms using social networks, reputation and solvency tend to become one. As the editors point out, the transformation of markets is not a linear process, much less an evolutionary one.

The authors rightly reject a deterministic view and argue that exchange ‘is embedded within relations that exceed one’s social affiliation [...]. The embedded exchange constitutes a transactional realm that touches on, yet eventually transgresses a specific community’ (p. 11). Indeed, exchanges between ‘natives’ and ‘migrants’ or ‘strangers’ are permanent; knowledge systems that predict good fortune combine religions; bazaar traders are bound by relations of neighbourhood and urban affinities.

The political economy of exchanges

If the idea of considering the market always as an ‘exchange’ is convincing, one can wonder about the political economy of the ‘embedded exchange’. Formalization would be the ‘end of humanity’, declares a bag seller from the bazaar of Bānāras (p. 258). One can imagine that he is referring to the crucial role of sociality, personal interactions, and the fear that formalization will make all this disappear. To some extent, although this may not be what the bag seller has in mind, his words also remind us of one of Polanyi’s main messages:¹³ attempts to ‘disembed’ the market in

⁹Florence Jany-Catrice, *A political economy of the measurement of inflation* (Cham: Springer, 2020); Anush Kapadia and Benjamin Lemoine, ‘From debt dirigisme to debt markets in France and India’, in *A world of public debts: A political history*, (eds) Nicolas Barreyre and Nicolas Delalande. Palgrave Studies in the History of Finance (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 373–403, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48794-2_15; Alain Desrosières, *The politics of large numbers: A history of statistical reasoning*, (trans.) Camille Naish; 1st edn, 1993 (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁰Christopher Alan Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: North Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770–1870*, 1st edn, 1983 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28.

¹¹Craig Muldrew, *The economy of obligation: The culture of credit and social relations in early modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

¹²Michel Feher, *Rated agency. Investee politics in a speculative age* (New York: Zone Books, 2018).

¹³Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*, 1st edn, 1944 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

pre-industrial Europe were dehumanizing, first and foremost because they destroyed people's 'traditional' protections (the family, the clan, the village). This was untenable and gradually different forms of alternative protection were put in place, leading to the 'great transformation'. What Polanyi did not or hardly commented on, and I am not sure that the bag seller perceived it either, is the fundamentally hierarchical dimension of these historical forms of protection. Whether they are based on family or village reciprocity or religious or feudal redistribution, historical forms of protection are subject to multiple hierarchies structured by social institutions such as class, caste, religion, gender, location, age, and so forth. Indeed, exchanges cross community affiliations and boundaries. But an infinite number of contemporary examples show to what extent exchange remains shaped by and constitutive of pre-existing social hierarchies.

The multiple efforts of the Indian government to 'modernize' the Indian economy and to extract it from social structures and traditions, including at the bottom of the pyramid, shows resistance similar to that of the bag seller. Take the case of the so-called 'financial inclusion' policies that are supposed to free poor Indians from moneylenders and allow them to save to protect themselves against the future. The poor are very credit-hungry, but access to 'formal' credit does not eliminate the wage advance from the labour recruiter, or the informal loan from the landowner, the local boss, the friend, the neighbour, or the maternal uncle. And if these various forms of exchange persist, it is not necessarily because the working poor appreciate being bonded to their labour recruiter: it is first and foremost because the wage advance guarantees them a job and protects them.¹⁴ With regard to bank savings, the results are even more disappointing for policymakers: many of the working poor make very little use of them, simply because it is much more rational to invest in other forms of storage and circulation of value that protect them much better than a bank account would. They more often invest surplus cash in the form of 'investment in people'¹⁵ (such as ceremonial expenses), or multipurpose money (gold in India, while elsewhere it could be livestock, seeds, precious fabrics, and so forth).¹⁶ However, such protection comes at a price.

Let us take the example of caste. Caste is a malleable, evolving concept, sometimes used tactically. Nevertheless, the 'economics of caste' cannot be ignored.¹⁷ When the exchange is formalized by a contract, the role of caste becomes subtler, more indirect, and more discreet. The contract can give the illusion of equality—here, the precepts of

¹⁴Isabelle Guérin, 'Bonded labour, agrarian changes and capitalism: Emerging patterns in South India', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2013), pp. 405–423.

¹⁵Jane I. Guyer, *Money matters: Instability, values, and social payments in the modern history of West African communities* (Portsmouth; London: Heinemann/James Currey, 1995).

¹⁶For the South Indian case, see Isabelle Guérin, Govindan Venkatasubramanian and Santosh Kumar, 'Rethinking saving: Indian ceremonial gifts as relational and reproductive saving', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2020), pp. 387–401. For other parts of the Global South, see Gustav Peebles, 'Rehabilitating the hoard: The social dynamics of unbanking in Africa and beyond', *Africa*, vol. 84, no. 4 (2014), pp. 595–613; Parker MacDonald Shipton, *Credit between cultures: Farmers, financiers, and misunderstanding in Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁷David Mosse, 'The modernity of caste and the market economy', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2020), pp. 1225–1271.

neoclassic economics play their performative role. Nevertheless, caste remains a powerful classification operator that is precisely shaped by exchange. In many places in contemporary India, and even as the market economy has gained ground, one rarely borrows from or works for someone 'lower' than oneself according to local systems of social hierarchy.¹⁸ Gender, insufficiently explored in the book, calls for similar commentary.

Social status and belonging also shape reputations, rightly considered an essential asset by different authors. Social status and belonging also shape to whom the various jurisdictions apply, who benefits from them, and who fixes them. Not everyone benefits in the same way from multiple and contested jurisdictions, as the chapters on sand and alcohol make clear.

Here again, the case of finance is illustrative. Considerable arrears and non-performing assets plague the Indian banking sector.¹⁹ This is part of the criminal economy described by Barbara Harriss-White and J. Jeyaranjan and allows the most powerful to default on their debts and absolve themselves of the repayment ethic. This criminal economy relies on a particular reputation: the 'bosses' of the Mafia Raj.²⁰ As figures who are both 'admired and feared', the bosses (most often men) possess 'quasi-magical powers' and a 'charismatic authority', and in fact 'the art of bossing' consists above all in exercising their 'personal sovereignty'.²¹ At the other end of the social scale, the financial inclusion policies mentioned above—also qualified as 'working class credit'²²—have spread over the last two decades, primarily aimed at women. Both jurisdiction and reputation are very different here. Thanks to now very sophisticated credit scoring devices and biometric techniques, repayment default is tantamount to being blacklisted and losing one's solvency. The result is a very different repayment ethic. It explains why, at the time of writing this article, as the Covid-19 pandemic (and first-and-foremost, the lockdown) ravaged many livelihoods, one of the first anxieties of the Indian working poor, and women in particular, is to repay their loans to financial companies.²³ As we can see, while reputation forges exchanges at different ends of the social ladder, reputation does not mean the same thing to everyone. And, obviously, not everyone has the same ability to challenge the courts.

¹⁸For labour, there is extensive empirical evidence. See, for example, Barbara Harriss-White, *India working: Essays on society and economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Alpa Shah et al., *Ground down by growth. Tribe, caste, class, and inequality in twenty-first century India* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Geert De Neve, *The everyday politics of labour: Working lives in India's informal economy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); Floriane Bolazzi, 'Caste, class and social mobility: A longitudinal study in a North Indian village, 1958–2015', PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Milano/University Paris Diderot, 2020. For a review, see Mosse, 'The modernity of caste'. For debt, see, for instance, Isabelle Guérin, Bert d'Espallier and Govindan Venkatasubramanian, 'Debt in rural South India: Fragmentation, social regulation and discrimination', *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 9 (2013), pp. 1155–1171.

¹⁹C. P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, 'The banking conundrum. Non-performing assets and neo-liberal reform', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 13 (2018), pp. 129–137.

²⁰Michelutti et al., *Mafia Raj*.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 3–8.

²²Sohini Kar, *Financializing poverty: Labor and risk in Indian microfinance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

²³Isabelle Guérin et al., 'Covid-19 and the unequalizing infrastructures of financial inclusion in Tamil Nadu', *Development and Change*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2021), pp. 927–951.

Decolonizing economics

In conclusion, I would like to make two points. First, if the thickness, complexity, and malleability of markets must be explored—and *Rethinking Markets* does it brilliantly—this should not make us lose sight of their hierarchical dimension: the social and moral fabric of markets is also, very often, an extremely efficient mechanism for extracting surplus and maintaining or reinforcing inequalities.²⁴ A key issue in understanding contemporary markets is to study how different forms of morality intertwine (and the precepts of neoclassic economics are one morality among others) and how these moralities reinforce or reconfigure inequalities. Secondly, the dialogue with other regions of the world, only sketched out in the introduction, really deserves to be continued. Markets take shape in specific historical contexts, and understanding them presupposes both historicization and contextualization. But the mechanisms and processes described in the book are surely valid elsewhere, including in the most capitalist and ‘modernized’ societies. Of course, in many parts of the Global North, the ‘embedded exchange’ takes different forms due to the existence of more robust jurisdictions and social protection systems. As a result, the articulation between the principles of redistribution, solidarity, and the market—another major lesson of Polanyi that remains valid in the contemporary global world—takes specific forms.²⁵ But the disembedded market does not exist any more than in *Rethinking Markets*. However, the fiction of the disembedded market does exist and neoclassic economists and policymakers constantly claim it to justify neoliberal and austerity policies.

The fiction also persists because of the impregnation of our categories of thought by neoclassical economics and its performative effects. Neoclassical economics has infused the ways of seeing and thinking of so-called ‘Western’ societies where this knowledge has emerged. Moreover, neoclassical economics has performative effects, in the sense that it transforms the reality it is supposed to study.²⁶ This tends to invisibilize the social, moral, and political dimensions of markets, and this is why the detour through non-Western markets is so useful since it helps to deconstruct prevalent categories of thought and, more globally, to decolonize economic thought.²⁷ It is this that makes this book such an important contribution: beyond an essential input to the understanding of Indian markets, it is also a valuable step towards the decolonization of economics as a field of knowledge.

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²⁴Harriss-White, *India working*.


²⁵Polanyi, *The great transformation*.

²⁶Donald A. MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa and Lucia Siu, *Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁷Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven and Surbhi Kesar, ‘Standing in the way of rigor? Economics’ meeting with the decolonizing agenda’, No. 2110, Working Papers from the New School for Social Research, Department of Economics, 2021.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Everywhere a market: Rethinking embedded exchange in modern India

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All societies embody various forms of exchange. In South Asia, different mechanisms, including economic markets, have long engaged buyers and sellers in transactions involving goods and services for money or other goods and services.

This assessment of *Rethinking Markets in Modern India: Embedded Exchange and Contested Jurisdiction*¹ begins by briefly rehearsing Karl Polanyi's formative ideas about the workings of precapitalist and capitalist economies. Although only a few of its 13 chapters explicitly reference Polanyi, his insights about embedded exchange represent a significant point of departure for the entire volume, as they often have for scholars in anthropology, economic sociology, geography, history, and even economics (at least those associated with institutional economics).

All the essays in *Rethinking Markets* build on arguments about the intersections of economy and society that hark back to Polanyi's seminal writings in the 1940s and 1950s about the market principle being foundational to the economic organization of modern society. For much of human history, transactions were largely negotiated through institutions and practices that he terms 'reciprocity' and 'redistribution'. These modes of exchange predominated until the 'great transformation' ushered in by the Industrial Revolution led to the rise of a capitalist economy in the nineteenth century, first in Britain and Europe and subsequently in other world regions. Thereafter, the primary mode of economic integration was through a market economy whose participants behaved seemingly in accord with what Adam Smith and neoclassical economists assume to be an inherent human propensity to 'truck, barter,

¹ Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas E. Haynes and Sebastian Schwecke (eds), *Rethinking markets in modern India: Embedded exchange and contested jurisdiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). All page numbers in this article refer to the volume under review.

and exchange'.² In this regard, Polanyi, whose views were influenced by Marxism, evidently falls in line with the suppositions of mainstream economists.

Reciprocity and redistribution, by contrast, in Polanyi's formulation, integrate societies differently. The former features 'symmetrical social relations' and 'movements between correlative points of symmetrical groupings in society'; the latter, a 'centralized hierarchy' in which 'movements [lead] towards an allocative center and out of it again'. Reciprocity involves 'mutuality between individuals'; redistribution, 'sharing among individuals' under the direction of 'an allocative center', typically dominated by a person or group in the community with power and standing. The former is decentralized and egalitarian, the latter centralized and hierarchical.³

In Polanyi's estimation—and a lead rightly not pursued in *Rethinking Markets*—reciprocity and redistribution constitute modes of exchange fundamentally different from those operating in a market economy in that the latter represents 'an independent economic sphere' and an 'extreme case of a disembedded economy' involving extensive money transactions. In his thinking, a market economy stands

apart from the rest of society, more especially from the political and governmental system. In a market economy the production and distribution of material goods in principle is carried on through a self-regulating system of price-making markets. It is governed by laws of its own, the so-called laws of supply and demand, and motivated by fear of hunger and hope of gain. Not blood-tie, legal compulsion, religious obligation, fealty or magic creates the sociological situations which make individuals partake in economic life but specifically economic institutions such as private enterprise and the wage system.⁴

Reciprocity and redistribution, by contrast, are deeply enmeshed in noneconomic institutions, their workings facilitated 'through kinship, marriage, age-groups, secret societies, totemic associations, and public solemnities'. Their allocation systems, in other words, are governed by customs, traditions, and non-market institutional forms, a 'social embeddedness' absent in a market economy in which the economy is not 'embedded in social relations, [rather] social relations are embedded in the economic system'.⁵

While Polanyi did not rule out the presence of reciprocity and redistribution in a market economy, he conceives of the latter as uniquely organized by the forces of supply and demand without consideration of norms, social relationships, or nonmarket institutional rules. As his critics have discerned, he constructs an overly stark dichotomy between the market and other forms of exchange and does not dispute

²Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1944]), pp. 45, 46–58; Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg and Harry W. Pearson (eds), *Trade and market in the early empires: Economies in history and theory* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957).

³Polanyi, *The great transformation*, pp. 49–58; K. Polanyi, 'The economy as instituted process', in *Trade and Market*, (eds) Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson, pp. 243–270.

⁴K. Polanyi, 'Aristotle discovers the economy', in *Trade and Market*, (eds) Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson, p. 68.

⁵Polanyi, *The great transformation*, p. 60.

the neoclassical conception of a market economy as consisting of individuals behaving wholly in self-interested, rational, and optimizing ways without any reference to social relationships.⁶

Fortunately, no Polanyi-like distinctions between the idealized market and non-market forms of exchange preoccupy the contributors to *Rethinking Markets in Modern India*.⁷ Indeed, all their essays subscribe to what the opening chapter on 'Markets in Modern India: Embedded, Contested, Pliable' identifies as a unifying theme: 'embedded exchange'. As its authors Sebastian Schwecke and Ajay Gandhi observe, their notion of that concept, famously associated with Polanyi, is more expansive than its conventional formulation as 'economic exchange ... inserted or immersed in society' through such institutions as 'durable lineages of caste, ethnicity, gender or religion'. The 12 essays that follow, they insist, go beyond viewing 'endogamous communities as the locus of analysis' and highlighting different groups and individuals involved in markets by virtue of their 'ethnic and religious affiliation, proximity to states, and control over markets' (p. 10).

According to Schwecke and Gandhi 'embedded exchange' refers to transactions shaped by 'processes of communication, information flows, and perceptions of equity in exchange, rationalities, prices, opportunity, obligation, propriety, reputation, trust, and risk' (p. 11). They envision their collection of essays expanding on the idea of 'sociality', as implying 'bounded networks and community fealty' to extend to 'cross-cutting understandings and grammars that allow for trade across collective lines' (p. 11) and beyond locality and community to wider spatial latitudes and deeper temporal scales. For contemporary markets have 'their own enduring lineages and entrenched temporalities' (p. 12) and embedded exchange necessarily incorporates 'moral aspects' (p. 13); in short, market transactions entail 'social, spatial, genealogical, and moral bundles' (p. 14).

As these introductory remarks underscore, this set of essays focuses not only on structures but also on the content of transactions. Embeddedness is structural; it is about networks and institutions resulting from the enmeshing of economies in societies but also the content of structural linkages and relationships, no less so than context. Not that all the chapters pay equal attention to both the context and content of embeddedness—some do more of the former, others more of the latter or a mix of the two.

The volume's capacious notion of embedded exchange probably accounts for why the individual essays are not fixated on distinguishing among different forms of embeddedness—and perhaps for the better. Are certain structures, say networks of caste or community, more salient than others, for example, those forged by the state?

⁶Not everyone accepts such a characterization of Polanyi's arguments about market versus nonmarket exchange. See Fred Block, 'Karl Polanyi and the writing of *The great transformation*', *Theory and Society*, vol. 32 (2003), pp. 275–306; Stephen Gudeman, 'Necessity or contingency: Mutuality and market', in *Market and society: The great transformation today*, (eds) Chris Hann and Keith Hart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 17–37.

⁷Polanyi scholars often note that he only mentions embeddedness twice in *The great transformation*. As for his formulations about different types of exchange, see Bernard Barber, 'All economies are "embedded": The career of a concept, and beyond', *Social Research*, vol. 62, no. 2 (1995), pp. 387–413.

Does embeddedness assume different forms, some less social and more cultural, political, or cognitive in nature?⁸ Are those other structural forms more or less legible depending on one's focus on a particular cohort of market actors or commodities and not others?

Some chapters, not all, address the ways in which the state—colonial or post-colonial—and its institutions and representatives regulate the economic behaviour of nonstate market actors and the flow of commodities. As the opening comments by Schwecke and Gandhi point out, the volume also considers power relations that shape the nexus between market and society, resulting in issues of 'contested jurisdiction'—contestations arising not solely from the state's efforts to manage markets but also the presence of 'parallel and codependent authorities in exchange domains' (p. 15). As they elaborate, 'commercial competitors, in regulatory, infrastructural, symbolic, legal, and organizational terms, both converge and collaborate, and compete and combat' (p. 18).

Understandably this volume does not explicitly tackle debates about the social embeddedness thesis that have grown out of Polanyi's formulations in fields such as economic sociology, particularly in the wake of Mark Granovetter's noteworthy 1985 article insisting that economic behaviour and institutions are embedded in structures of social relations, including in modern industrial society.⁹ What do the different authors make of the wrangling over whether society or culture inflect economic transactions or constitute them? What is their take on the relationship of society to markets: complementary or constitutive?

Nor does this volume revisit historical debates about the relationship of the bazaar economy to the formal economy of colonial India, a concern not pertinent in any case for the chapters concentrating on the contemporary period. But several authors refer to bazaars and one chapter specifically treats them as a distinct economic sphere in the manner developed in Rajat Ray's influential 1995 article in this journal: as an 'intermediate' nexus in the colonial period between European-dominated capitalism emanating from the subcontinent's port cities and linked to the metropole in Britain and the lowest economic sphere configured by the 'subsistence economy of the millions of peasants, artisans and pedlars'. In Ray's formulation, the bazaar flourished as a parallel economy to the colonial European one, extended across the vast hinterland of the subcontinent, operated under different rules than those prescribed by European commercial laws, and followed different norms. A discrete 'global sub-formation', the bazaar economy stretched across the Indian Ocean, from West Asia and East Africa to Southeast Asia.¹⁰

⁸Peter Levin, 'Culture and markets: How economic sociology conceptualizes culture', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 619, no. 1 (2008), pp. 114–129.

⁹Mark Granovetter, 'Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 91, no. 3 (1985), pp. 485–510.

¹⁰Rajat Kanta Ray, 'Asian capital in the age of European domination: The rise of the bazaar, 1800–1914', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1995), pp. 449–554. Also Claude Markovits, 'Structure and agency in the world of Asian commerce during the era of European colonial domination (c. 1790–1950)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 50, no. 2/3 (2007), pp. 106–123, for a different interpretation of the interplay between the bazaar and European capitalist economy in Asia generally and South Asia specifically.

Markets figure prominently in this volume but empirical markets, particularly marketplaces, are not its primary interest, although several chapters discuss their sociality as manifested in the roles of participants and/or commodities in commercial transactions. The one essay (Chapter 7) that treats a market as an actual physical site is Mekhala Krishnamurthy's fine ethnographic study of the wholesale agricultural produce market or *mandi* of Harda in Madhya Pradesh. Partly a 'regulatory biography' of that notified market, also known as an APMC after the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees Act, her chapter on 'Mandi Acts and Market Lore' traces Harda's ties to the 'larger political, administrative, commercial, and social systems and networks' during the last half century when regulatory changes enhanced the role of state functionaries in commodity and credit transactions once largely centred on commission agents/traders and farmers (pp. 181–182).

Notified at the end of the 1960s, Harda Mandi, one of the 6,746 regulated markets in India, was dominated by rich farmers in league with mercantile interests, at one time in the hands of a merchant with powerful political ties. Over the course of the last decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century, a period of rising agricultural productivity, state government intervention led to the dismantling of this credit and commodity system. Interestingly, the current farmer protests in Punjab, Haryana, and other states against deregulation in the marketing of agricultural goods have been partly animated by concerns about ruptures in the long-standing economic and social ties between traders and farmers and the bypassing of *mandis* altogether. And given Krishnamurthy's main focus on the 'highly differential and differentiated powers and interests' of market actors (p. 203), her study stays very much on course and does not explore Harda's relationship to the 196 villages in its catchment area (p. 187) or the system of periodic markets (*haats*) populated by petty producers and traders obtaining in every region and locality or her *mandi*'s profile in comparison to other wholesale markets in the region, let alone other states such as Bihar that opted out of the APMC Act a decade-and-a-half ago.¹¹

Projit Bihari Mukharji's chapter (Chapter 4) on the 'Magic of Business' also invites us into the realm of the bazaar—not a specific marketplace but 'a historical space ... [with] its own rich body of complex epistemologies and ontologies of exchange' (p. 87). The lore relating to his locale is not as a site of 'rationality' (p. 86) but of magic and mystery, a place in which some participants rely on 'spells, incantations, amulets, magic diagrams, secret rituals, etc.' (p. 88) to negotiate the bazaar. He detects these 'occult technologies' through a close reading of 'bazaar grimoires'—texts written in Bengali and Hindi over a century-long period from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries—produced to help small-scale retail traders especially but also other market

¹¹Unfortunately, the literature on individual marketplaces or local and regional marketing systems is relatively thin, generally the handiwork of anthropologists, geographers, and historians. Some of these writings cited in the volume under review include: C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: North Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Ritu Birla, *Stages of capital: Law, culture, and market governance in late colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Kajri Jain, *Gods in the bazaar: The economies of Indian calendar art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, society, and the colonial state in Bihar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

participants. As these writings reveal, many people conceived of the bazaar as intertwined with the occult: an elusive and unreliable venue that required special handling to deal with its supernatural forces. That is, not everyone who converged on markets thought of them as imbued only with economic forces. Market lore instructed them otherwise, as Mukharji's remarkable textual sources convey from the perspective of their authors and publishers, and presumably also their readers.

Market participants and their social (and cultural and political) embeddedness figure notably in several other equally compelling essays. David Rudner's splendid contribution on 'Banking in the Bazaar' (Chapter 2) profiles the dominant presence of Nattukottai Chettiars or Nakarattars in the credit and financial markets across the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From their beginnings in the salt trade in the seventeenth century, they emerged as the principal merchant-banking caste by carving out vital intermediary roles between the British and local populations, first in South India and subsequently in Ceylon and Southeast Asia. Increasingly involved in enterprises ranging from 'commodities trading, moneylending, [and] domestic and overseas banking operations' to 'industrial investment', they organized themselves into an intricate 'segmentary network of interdependent family business firms'. These firms served as commercial banks that accepted money on deposit and drafted 'hundis and other financial instruments for use in the transfer of loanable capital to branch offices and to other banks'. Collectively, their 'unified banking system' played a crucial role 'in the credit markets of South Asia and the Indian Ocean rim' (p. 50).

Rudner, who has written extensively about the Nakarattars,¹² meticulously details their business practices, including their knack for offering lower interest rates on loans than other bankers, their system of deposit banking, their handling of bills of exchange to finance trade or transfer funds across vast distances, their complex accounting procedures, and their willingness to utilize the colonial legal apparatus to enforce legal contracts. Critical as well to their success, until the rise of state-regulated banking in the 1930s undermined their effectiveness, were their 'caste-defined social relationships based on business territory, residential location, descent, marriage, and common cult membership' (p. 51). Caste members, furthermore, collaborated to borrow from British-run banks to fund their own enterprises and assist colleagues, and amass capital through wedding gifts and dowry, kinship and caste obligations, and from investments in and control of temple trusts.

While Rudner's chapter highlights the organization and operations of a merchant-banking caste from within, Sebastian Schwecke's chapter (Chapter 6), appropriately entitled 'The Artifice of Trust', looks at two ostensibly dissimilar entities in Banaras from without—'organized' banking in the early to mid-twentieth century and contemporary 'informal' financial institutions—to underline the importance of managing 'trust as artifact and artifice' (p. 152). He argues persuasively that financial transactions entail multiple 'registers of trust' and not 'a simple substitution of direct interpersonal sequence of exchange for a unified form of system trust' (p. 152). In his estimation, trust is either 'procedural' or 'reputational', the latter 'person-centric but

¹²See, for example, David Rudner, *Caste and capitalism in colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

... “systemic” to some extent in that reputation is far more than a mere track record of sequences of interpersonal exchange’; it presupposes that people with ‘sufficient reputation’ will act in accordance with ‘the norms of an often vaguely defined systemic code’ (p. 153). The former, by contrast, induces wariness about ‘the system either by the person trusting the efficacy of procedures, or by the institution ... mistrusting persons or other institutions ... that do not demonstrably follow specific procedural codes’ (p. 153).

Schwecke ingeniously documents these different registers by perusing bank advertisements in Hindi newspapers over an extended period of time. In the 1930s and 1940s advertisements prominently displayed the names of reputable individuals who personified the ‘unknowable qualities of the bank as an institution’, an emphasis also salient in the informal sector of petty moneylenders in today’s Banaras. In the ensuing decades, banks resorted to words and images manifesting ‘procedural registers of trust’, a shift expressed in their advertisements foregrounding their ‘procedural norms’, extralocal connections, and brand as embodied in their logos (p. 167). Schwecke’s important point—germane to other chapters in the volume and the vast literature on networks—is about the salience of trust or *vishvaas*, to use the Hindi term, in configuring relationships, whether involving modern financial institutions such as banks or purportedly anachronistic ones such as bazaar moneylenders.

Andy Rotman’s essay (Chapter 9) also examines the commercial realm in Banaras but to register a different point: the extent to which commerce and religion intersect. Based on his extensive research on market participants in one of its main commercial areas, he reports that traders routinely recruit deities into ‘certain visual and market systems’ to emphasize the moral system undergirding their practices. Markets, he writes, ‘can be moralized and moralizing, as well as sacralized and sacralizing’ (p. 236). Consequently, transactions pit ‘Brandism vs. Bazaarism’, to cite his chapter heading, a contest in which the latter generally prevails because of the importance of ‘reputational registers of trust’ (pp. 252–253). Brands matter less, the reputation of market actors more, their standing closely tied to ‘religiosity’ (p. 254).¹³

That familiar finding is a stepping stone for Rotman’s larger and telling proposition about the efficacy of trust networks in creating informal and voluntary ‘associational engagements’ that generate ‘cohesion and solidarity among otherwise unaffiliated shopkeepers and residents. These affiliations are not based on preexisting solidarities, such as affinities of caste or ethnicity; they are diverse and constitutive, forging solidarities where there are none’ (p. 258).

Douglas Haynes’ excellent chapter (Chapter 5) on advertising in English- and Gujarati-language newspapers in western India in the early twentieth century also discusses brands, specifically of medical commodities promising a remedy and relief for various ailments. His study shows how small-time businesses successfully captured distant markets for their products by placing advertisements in the appropriate local outlets. That approach enabled them to sell their wares directly to customers without having to line up intermediaries in local bazaars where these manufacturers had no

¹³For earlier work on the importance of a ‘reputation for piety’ in establishing a merchant’s ‘credit-worthiness’, see Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars*; Jonathan Parry, ‘On the moral perils of exchange’, in *Money and the morality of exchange*, (eds) Jonathan P. Parry and Maurice Bloch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 70.

standing or networks. Moreover, their advertisements struck the appropriate 'reputational registers' by associating their wares with 'authenticity, indigeneity, science, and conjugal fulfillment' (p. 142).

Presumably, the advertisements also caught the eye of bazaar traders who joined the ranks of buyers to become sellers once the products gained local traction. In addition, these notices undoubtedly overlapped with other publicity materials that banked on a different combination of words and images to convey modernity, science, and Western tastes and ideals as well. Did these different permutations influence one another? Part of what makes Haynes' essay particularly trenchant is the 'vernacular capitalism' framework in which he anchors his analysis, by which he means a commercial setting defined by the emergence of 'a new consuming class, particularly the urban middle class' in large and small towns and cities, and the growing circulation of 'new print media', especially in vernacular languages (p. 119).

Aditi Saraf's admirable chapter (Chapter 8) on trade between the Indian- and Pakistani-administered parts of Kashmir dwells on a different set of externalities: those relating to sovereignty. Her fascinating fieldwork-based account tracks the flow of ostensibly locally produced primary goods or handicrafts bartered across the Line of Control (LoC) that demarcates the divide between the two territories. Although a highly securitized area, transactions there, too, are legal and illegal, and involve a host of actors, including traders, truck drivers, and workers in a tangle of 'alliances, channels, and connections'. More so than in the other sites discussed in this volume, these participants routinely contend with state power that they attempt to 'question and disrupt' in order to reimagine, re-enact, and undo the status quo in the relations between 'community and sovereignty'. Contestation is always imminent, in other words.

Briefly, the author alludes to the rarity of trust 'in trade conducted under intense suspicion and inspection' (p. 224) but does not pursue the full context and content of the ties that enable traders to barter with one another without formal contracts and dispute resolution mechanisms. What enables this extraordinary cross-border trade to thrive under the precarious circumstances created by the many strictures imposed by the authorities on both sides is not fleshed out here, although it is in other writings, including the author's previous work.¹⁴

Roger Begrich's illuminating ethnographic account of 'Transactional Grammars of Alcohol in Jharkhand' (Chapter 12) traces alcohol flows among the Mundas, an Adivasi or tribal population, to establish the importance of liquor in constructing community. A 'liquid asset' with significant economic as well as social and moral value, it is bought and sold but also exchanged for labour and imbibed on ritual occasions such as births, weddings, and funerals, and certain festivals. Its exchange and consumption validate and consolidate relationships among community members and also strengthen connections to their 'spirits, ancestors, and deities' (p. 325). The author helpfully brings the state into his account of the moral economy of alcohol use by disclosing the contradictory tendencies in excise regulations and policing that permit 'customary social transactions or ritual offerings of rice beer' but prohibit 'the sale of

¹⁴Mahwish Hafeez, 'The line of control (LoC) trade: A ray of hope', *Strategic Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2014), pp. 74–93, suggests that traders across the LoC have family connections with one another.

customary forms of alcohol'. In the eyes of the state and its functionaries in this eastern state of India, 'the Adivasi subject permanently oscillates between experiences of illegality, stigmatization, solidarity, recognition, and betrayal' (p. 341).

Another set of essays elucidates the workings of embedded exchange by looking at specific commodities: land, lotteries, money, and sand. Nikhil Rao's outstanding chapter (Chapter 3) on 'Space in Motion' adeptly narrates the emergence of private property as an alienable commodity in the city of Bombay over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a market in land developed and rendered it increasingly scarce and pricey towards the end of the nineteenth century, multiple interests vied for control, including the colonial state as embodied in the Bombay Improvement Trust, commercial companies, landlords, merchants, and industrialists, all these parties drifting in and out of alliances with one another depending on the issues at stake. Claimants to land were many but their rights over it never straightforward, always entangled in customary and changing colonial laws about urban property. As the author concludes, contrary to liberal ideas about property, its meanings in Bombay were 'fluid and flexible', with urbanization leading to 'space in motion', a concept that informs his intricate discussion of 'the shifting meanings of property, and the strategic uses to which these various meanings were put by various state and nonstate actors in Bombay' (p. 83).

The Bombay urban property story does not conform to Polanyi's well-known 'double movement' argument about land, labour, and money being 'fictitious commodities' that were commodified before and during the 'great transformation' only to have the state and society push back against their incorporation into a market economy. That is, the state and/or civil society fabricated social protections to counter or curtail commodification, in effect leading to the market economy becoming embedded in society all over again.¹⁵

Matthew Hull's chapter (Chapter 11) on 'Market Making in Punjab Lotteries' investigates the regulatory history of lotteries by examining the role of the state (and its agencies) and corporations in shaping their sales. His concern is not with seeing the lottery market in terms of such unproductive binaries as legal and illegal and formal and informal but in explicating how and why a regulated lottery market invariably generates a parallel black market. In fact, as he shows, that development—allowing the sale of lotteries from other states or illegal lotteries—is built into the 'healthy functioning' (p. 318) of the industry, even though states depend on their own variety to raise funds and reduce taxes. Both sellers and buyers appreciate the additional options: the former, especially small-scale businesses, welcome the possibility of better returns from multiple offerings, whether legal or illegal, and the latter, more choices. Largely focused on the supply side of the market and not consumption, this essay does not refer to syndicate play, a feature of many studies concerned with emphasizing the social embeddedness of lottery behaviour in some countries.¹⁶

¹⁵Gareth Dale, *Reconstructing Karl Polanyi: Excavation and critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), pp. 4–6; Eppo Maertens, 'Polanyi's double movement: A critical reappraisal', *Social Thought and Research*, vol. 29 (2008), pp. 126–153.

¹⁶See, for example, Mauro F. Guillén, Roberto Garvía and Andrés Santana, 'Embedded play: Economic and social motivations for sharing lottery tickets', *European Sociological Review*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2012), pp. 344–354.

'Black money', Ajay Gandhi finds (Chapter 10), insinuates itself into all kinds of exchanges at all levels in India. A term that refers to undeclared 'liquidity', generally in the form of money, gold, or property, it is widely used in all kinds of transactions, from the quotidian to the highly illegal, and is 'indispensable to democratic politics' (p. 275). The author's focus is not on showcasing how black money is conventionally associated with disruptions in 'public morality' (p. 279) but in revealing how it reproduces 'social ties, relational obligations, and transactional orders' (p. 285). He uncovers those effects by scrutinizing the 'collaborations and commitments' of a subsidized ration shop owner who illegally resells in the black market the state-subsidized kerosene he has been allocated to dispense among ration card holders. Rather than concentrate on how these transactions enrich this black marketeer, he follows the trail of the black money into 'kinship ventures, business ties, neighborhood festivities, and political investments' (p. 271). For black money both undermines and underwrites 'social relations, temporal horizons, and transactional orders' (p. 290). Instructive as well is his finding that the state's efforts to extirpate black money, to some extent, also creates the conditions for its currency.

The volume ends on a high note with a first-rate investigation by Barbara Harriss-White and J. Jeyaranjan of 'Building on Sand?' (Chapter 13) that exposes the pervasiveness of the black economy in contemporary society and politics. In rich detail the authors document the 'countervailing power' that criminal organizations have appropriated in relation to the state, a 'Mafia Raj' whose black money permeates democratic politics and other enterprises. Their chapter is especially valuable in showing how sand, a key component of cement and concrete, was once a 'free good' mostly handled by petty traders but became increasingly commodified and politicized from the 1980s onwards. Based on interviews conducted with participants and informed observers they conclude that the state's efforts to regulate the market in sand—or any other commodity—in effect generates structures and processes quickly captured by criminal organizations in league with political parties and become yet another set of crime-friendly legal regulations for nonstate actors to manipulate. Such dynamics have led to a growing criminalization of politics and a growing politicization of crime, as evidenced by the criminal market in sand becoming not so much 'socially embedded' as inextricably intertwined with a number of seemingly disparate entities: 'legislature, executive, judiciary, capital, labor, and civil society' (p. 359).

The volume under review is an exceptional collection that enriches our understanding of 'embedded exchange' and 'contested jurisdiction' in the workings of markets in modern India. Its essays excel in recounting the roles of different market actors and processes, state and nonstate, in shaping the context and content of transactions and relationships. As with any edited volume, whose parts have cohered through careful selection and serendipity, this book, too, covers certain topics and not others, for instance, nary a mention of the market in art or blood and organs, to cite other commodities that have recently attracted considerable scholarly attention. And as with any compendium representing multiple authors from different disciplinary backgrounds whose work is at different stages of completion, this volume provides effective answers to many provocations arising from Polanyi's highly original insights about exchange

and social embeddedness but also leaves some pending. Fortunately, all the contributors have a lot more to say about their subject matter,¹⁷ and we can assuredly look forward to learning a lot more about markets in modern India in the coming years.


Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹⁷For example, some of the chapters have grown out of excellent recent theses: Roger Begrich, 'Inebriety and indigeneity: The moral governance of Adivasis and alcohol in Jharkhand, India', PhD thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 2013; Aditi Saraf, 'Ellipses of exchange: Freedom, mobility, and the moral economy in Kashmir', PhD thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 2016.

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REVIEW ARTICLE

The entanglements of exchange in India

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Abstract

In this *Modern Asian Studies* book symposium, scholars of South Asia analyse the political, ethical, and epistemic aspects of market life, building on the volume *Rethinking Markets in Modern India*.¹ This interdisciplinary conversation approaches transactional realms from the disciplines of history, anthropology, development studies, and political economy. The symposium's contributors examine a range of pertinent issues that encompass customary forms of exchange and capitalist aspects of trade. Among the topics discussed are those of market fetishism, bazaar knowledge, social embeddedness, forms of transactional representation and translation, and institutional and regulatory contexts for commerce.

Keywords: Markets; India; Pakistan; embeddedness

The vast literature on markets in South Asia has hitherto been dominated by two overarching frameworks: neoclassical economics and heterodox political economy. The former views markets mainly as vehicles for the balancing of supply and demand—often under conditions of asymmetric information and transaction costs—while the latter is concerned primarily with the shaping of exchange through relations of power and access to productive resources; ‘efficiency’, ‘price discovery’, ‘openness’, and ‘globalization’ are watchwords of the former, while ‘relations of production’, ‘distribution’, ‘class’, and ‘exploitation’ pervade the latter. Both traditions have evolved in close contact with thinking about policy and, at least in the case of the latter, sought relevance with social movements of farmers, workers, and the Left in general.

Given this background, what makes the present volume unique is that it eschews any pretence at relevance to immediate policy in favour of exploring new vistas in the study of South Asian markets. With contributions mainly by historians and anthropologists, its principal aim is to demonstrate that the language of economists and policymakers is often at odds with how those operating in India's economy conceive of

¹ Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas E. Haynes and Sebastian Schwecke (eds), *Rethinking markets in modern India: Embedded exchange and contested jurisdiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

their activities, and it seeks to bring out these myriad understandings in a range of different spheres. In place of the familiar themes associated with the existing literature, it draws on a different conceptual vocabulary emphasizing ‘reciprocities’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘embedding/disembedding’, ‘materiality/immateriality’, and ‘meaning making’. Furthermore, it questions the idea of markets as bounded sites governed by state-imposed strictures and instead highlights the existence of multiple sovereignties and contestation over the very meaning of what constitutes a market. All this leads to a remarkably fecund collection with wide-ranging implications for the study of markets in the region as a whole.

However, the work resists a conventional review since it is held together more by a commitment to exploring diversity within Indian economic life than a core argument running throughout it. Although the introduction does make a valiant attempt at emphasizing thematic coherence—and succeeds to a certain extent—the book ultimately settles for a chronological division of chapters. More telling is the absence of a conclusion that brings together the different threads explored in the various chapters. This is understandable: after all, how does one bring together arguments from chapters on (among other things) caste-based banking, advertising, sovereignty, land, alcohol licences, lotteries, and even the occult? In fact, the lack of a conclusion indicates one way of reading the text: as an open-ended exploration of different themes, concepts, and contexts than a work fitting within an overarching schema. Indeed, if Indian markets are characterized by ambiguity, hybridity, and messiness, why must our scholarly frameworks seek out uniformity?

In keeping with this spirit, my review will focus on themes in the book that I believe constitute novel contributions to the existing literature and that have great potential in broadening our view of commodity exchange in South Asia. I will begin with the conceptual frames highlighted in the introduction and their importance for rethinking markets in South Asia. Owing to the constraints of the word limit, I shall only be able to interrogate how these and other concerns are manifested in a few selected contributions; the review will engage with the arguments in these chapters, highlighting their novelty, as well as contextualizing them within the larger literature on South Asian and international exchange, with a few insights from my own fieldwork. It will conclude with a very brief remark on whether the conceptual and empirical concerns set forth in the volume can be brought into meaningful conversation with the older literature on markets highlighted at the beginning of the review.

It is important to begin with the introduction, which lays out the book’s thematic orientation. The authors identify three concepts that broadly organize the scope of the enquiries: ‘embedded exchange’, ‘contested jurisdiction’, and ‘pliable markets’. The first concept is deployed to highlight how Indian markets continue to be influenced by a range of customary and social ‘codified and semi-codified means and practices’ (p. 7) that are the products of long histories of cooperation, conflict, and accommodation. This makes it different from Polanyi’s framework where the modern market was theorized as the antithesis of embedded forms of exchange.² More importantly, it extricates the concept from its traditional usage in studies confined to ‘ascriptive’ communities

²Karl Polanyi, *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*, 2nd edn (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

of caste, religion, and ethnicity and instead theorizes embedded exchange as a transactional realm traversing the spheres of individual, community, and locality to create new solidarities beyond one's immediate spatial and social grid.

This expanded understanding of embedded exchange is complemented by the concept of 'contested jurisdiction'. This implies that in place of a veritable Leviathan, markets are sites of contestation between different forms of regulative authorities, resulting in multiple sovereignties that shape exchange culture. Most significantly, they demonstrate how the dichotomy between legal and illegal/formal and informal spheres of market practice is a product of the ways in which the late colonial state intervened to 'regulate' what it believed to be the 'chaotic' domain of indigenous commerce. In other words, it is the state's desire for ordered and legible transactions and the peculiar modes of instituting these that prepare the ground for the proliferation of informal economic activities. But the authors also insist that the state—in its many layers—is often found selectively scrutinizing, accommodating, and even colluding with other centres of power and authority, many of which it officially castigates, in order to ensure the smooth functioning of commerce. The resultant market order is full of productive tensions emanating from multiple actors, institutions, and their manifold objectives. The chapters by Mekhala Krishnamurthy on grain markets in Madhya Pradesh and by Barbara Harris-White and J. Jeyaranjan on sand cartels in Tamil Nadu engage with these themes.

The third term—'pliable markets'—is used in two senses: first, to signify the sheer range of markets that exist across a number of goods and services, navigating the boundaries not simply of legality and illegality, but even materiality and immateriality; second, to show how far the evolution of markets in India is an outcome of their ability to accommodate, evade, and adapt to a range of influences that are at once economic, political, social, and ethical. Therefore, in order to map the contours of contemporary capitalism in India, the existing framings in terms of distinct ruptures—for example, between colonial and post-colonial eras—or the unfolding of a universal operational logic, say 'capital', are rightly deemed inadequate. Instead, the chapters in the collection seek to unearth the genealogies of particular markets—with their attendant twists and turns—to make a statement about the market economy in South Asia. The relationship between these three ordering devices—embedded exchange, contested jurisdiction, and pliable markets—is not always spelled out, however.

How do these and other concerns manifest in specific accounts? The chapter by David Rudner—based on his seminal work on the Nattukottai Chettiers—reveals how official views of informal finance as a chaotic, disordered, and unregulated realm were belied by the remarkably well-organized, transnational network of financial relations established by members of this group. From 1870 to 1930, this caste-based banking system not only became the premier means of private finance in the Madras presidency, but, more significantly, the main source of loanable funds in Southeast Asia, mainly Burma, Ceylon, and Malaya. In vivid detail, the chapter recounts how the Chettiers (or 'Nakarattars') were identified by their families and temples; how individuals were initiated into the world of business by apprenticeships in the agency houses of their family firms located across South and Southeast Asia for specific time periods; and how a highly complex configuration of deposit banking, *hundi* (privately negotiable instrument of credit), and credit transactions between caste members and accounting systems, based on diverse instruments with indigenous names and communal methods

of monitoring, enforcement, and sanction, was constructed and functioned across long distances and various trades. A remarkable feature of the system was that it required all individual firms, whatever their specific business activity, to simultaneously act as commercial banks: taking money on deposit and drafting *hundis* so that each individual firm was tied together to all others, with the elite Nakarattars (called *adithis*) acting as clearing houses, thus allowing all members to draw on the collective assets of the entire caste. In this way, individual firms were able to access deposit capital at lower rates than non-Nakarattars could obtain and far cheaper than borrowing in secured or unsecured loans.

Despite being a caste-based system par excellence—with strict demarcation between Nakarattar and non-Nakarattar—the caste itself was far from being an internally homogenous group. The most important aspect of this differentiation was the pattern of marriage alliances, which did not follow standard Dravidian kinship systems but drew upon a much wider universe, so that distance and differentiation were created not only in terms of blood and marriageability, but also financial cooperation. The segmentation did allow for demarcation of channels through which capital flowed, but it also meant that some groups had more privileged access than others and that many were simply connected through being part of the system without ever really coming into contact with one another. This supports the notion of ‘embedded exchange’ set out in the introduction as being supra-local but also complicates it: not only were the interests of individual firms an integral part of the system, but these firms employed a conceptual vocabulary that differentiated transactions based on proximity, with non-kin Nakarattars treated differently from others. Thus ‘embeddedness’ must be understood as a continuum, with more and less embedded forms and points in the system, something that becomes clear when the Nakarattar dispensation went into terminal decline post-1930 and eventually unravelled, leaving the vast majority of non-elite caste members disembedded and having to re-embed themselves into new forms of employment.

But a more important theoretical implication, not clearly spelled out, is that the functioning of an ‘embedded’ system across such vast distances and heterogeneous groups is an outcome of constant construction, reconstruction, and maintenance; as the work of scholars like Michel Callon and Bruno Latour demonstrates, notions of embeddedness presuppose a fully formed ‘society’ in which exchange is supposedly embedded. Yet embeddedness is better seen as an ‘effect’, an ‘assemblage’ of myriad connections between diverse groups of people, the instruments and goods that circulate among them, the means through which they move, the meanings they convey, and the contradictions that are inherent to them.³ A constructivist understanding of ‘embedded exchange’ achieved through a reading of the work of these scholars would complement the account set out in the chapter.

Such a constructivist view of finance comes forth more clearly in Sebastian Schwecke’s chapter on the functioning of trust in North Indian ‘informal’ lending. Drawing on the term ‘artifice’ from Frank Perlin’s recently published magnum opus

³Koray Caliskan and Michel Callon, ‘Economization, Part 1: Shifting attention from the economy towards processes of economization’, *Economy and Society*, vol. 38, no. 3, August 2009, pp. 369–398; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

City Intelligible to denote human devices that skilfully ‘fix’ entities (in this case trust and finance) in the face of formidable difficulties and uncertainties, he delineates two registers of trust operating in the financial markets of the city of Banaras from the mid-twentieth century: *procedural* and *reputational*.⁴ While procedural means of handling trust—with their foundation in formal codes backed by the legal authority of the state—are widely recognized as having systemic properties, the common assumption is that reputational forms of handling trust rely on personal proximity and intimate knowledge. The latter are thereby deemed as ‘localized’ and ‘primitive’ compared to the former and something to be overcome in the march towards ‘modernization’. It is a major contribution of this chapter to recognize reputation as constituting an intricate system in itself; with a degree of unknowability handled through adherence to codes of appropriate behaviour, a common transactional grammar, ways of circulating information that allow it to operate on supra-local scales, as well as a means of certification and sanction.

Even more interestingly, Schwecke shows how so-called ‘modern’ banks actually drew on reputational registers of trust in order to build their clientele. This is demonstrated through a close reading of banking advertisements and practices from mid-twentieth century Banaras, where moral vocabularies of ‘*sakh*’ (‘good credit’), denoting not merely sound finances but also social standing and reputation are more widely employed for disseminating credit than formal procedures, with the manager’s own ‘reputation’ an important draw for customers. Moreover, information about the reputation of customers was collected through neighbourhood and bazaar enquiries much like indigenous bankers and the branches dealt in *hundis* rather than in ‘modern’ financial instruments like cheques (pp. 160–161). The framing of reputation as an artifice resonates with my own research on agricultural markets in Pakistani Punjab where ideas of ‘*wihar*’ (simultaneously denoting social standing and sound credit) were not simply confined to traders, but were even employed by managers of private banks that did business with them.⁵

While advertising is a small part of Schwecke’s chapter, it takes centre stage in two very interesting contributions by Douglas Haynes and Andy Rotman. Advertising is usually confined to the flashy world of Indian corporate capital, which is contrasted with the ‘bazaar’ and its reliance on undifferentiated products bought through face-to-face interactions between market intermediaries and customers. Haynes directs our analytical gaze towards the existence of a third form of enterprise that he terms ‘vernacular capitalism’: the small, individual, or family run firms that produced consumer goods and advertised them through the emerging print medias—particularly vernacular newspapers—from the colonial period onwards. One of the main aims behind this practice was the manufacturers’ desire to assert greater control over the meaning their products conveyed and to wrest it away from bazaar intermediaries, shopkeepers, hawkers, and *vidyas* (indigenous medical practitioners). This process of ‘disembedding’ was made possible due to the emergence of a middle class that rejected traditional sources of product information as ‘unscientific’ and ‘backward’ and looked

⁴Frank Perlin, *City intelligible: A philosophical and historical anthropology of global commoditisation before industrialisation* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁵Muhammad Ali Jan, ‘Rural commercial capital: Accumulation, class and power in Pakistani Punjab’, DPhil, University of Oxford, 2017, pp. 70–75.

towards the vernacular press for information about commodities. Thus, the rise of vernacular capitalism was closely tied to the self-fashioning of the Indian middle class as quintessential bearers of modernity and allowed a number of firms—especially medical firms capitalizing on middle-class anxieties about sexual health—to considerably expand their scale of production and geographical reach.

Apart from the theme of embedded exchange, advertising crucially adds the dimension of cultural meaning that was entirely missing in both the neoclassical and political economy traditions; commodities are always entangled in webs of meaning and themselves generate new cultural relations so that questions of livelihood and accumulation are intimately tied to values and self-identity. But this realm is itself composed of several nuanced distinctions, as Rotman highlights in his chapter 'Brandism vs. Bazaarism', where 'brands' in the contemporary corporate sense are different from how they are experienced and interpreted in India's bazaar economy. Drawing on ethnographic work among merchants, consumers, religious leaders, devotees, pilgrims, and politicians in Banaras, Rotman argues that its bazaars have their own processes of differentiation and affiliation that 'branding' seeks to achieve for the corporate world; for example, while the modern brand maker explicitly wants to bring the attention of the beholder back to the company through legibility in order to forge 'stern fidelity', product 'labels' on jute bags in the Banaras bazaars—ranging from random images and texts in English—are not susceptible to such a reading; indeed, it is their 'exotic' or 'foreign' quality that made them desirable, though more important reasons are their perceived quality and durability.

Crucially, the bazaar operates on its own kind of franchise model, unlike that of the corporate sector where the corporate entity is the locus of trust; in bazaarism's franchise, the individual owner and their reputation are the focus of trust, with owners drawing on a range of imagery—from gods and goddesses to assert the owner's piety to photographs of deceased parent-owners to express a glorious lineage—in order to convey their 'franchise' and attract customers. There are some points of contention: such as the author's view that, unlike corporate branding, where transgressions by one franchisee reflect poorly on the entire corporate entity, this is not so for the bazaar. This may not be true for certain marketplaces which are seen as more than the sum of their parts—for example, the agricultural markets studied by this reviewer and contributors to this volume such as Barbara Harriss-White and Mekhala Krishnamurthy—which explains the need to punish behaviour that can potentially harm the reputation of the entire shared space. However, the author's larger point about understanding the rationality of the bazaar on its own terms, particularly the importance of forging complex, cross-communal social relationships, is of fundamental importance.

The significance of social relations in markets and the transactional grammar associated with them is a key concern throughout the book, with contributions by Ajay Gandhi and Roger Begrich revealing a dense moral universe of exchange in seemingly immoral spaces: the 'black economy' and the alcohol trade. Yet there is some debate in the contemporary literature on whether, in our quest to emphasize the importance of social relations and embedded exchange as a counter to the economist's singular focus on 'rational maximization', we may be entirely ignoring the latter's increasing importance as the moneyed economy penetrates deeper into our everyday lives. Of course, unlike the mainstream view, which naturalizes this process, anthropologists and historians can map its historical and institutionally constructed nature.

The work of Timothy Mitchell, for example, has shown how the ‘embedding of certain 20th century practices of calculation, description and enumeration into regulatory, government and market practices’ creates the economy as an ‘effect’.⁶ But the pervasive importance of short-term means-and-ends calculations, or what Georg Simmel terms ‘calculative reasoning’, is undeniable, as are their effects on established relations between market participants, even those of the small-scale bazaar-based enterprises studied in many of the chapters. Although Matthew Hull’s work on the Punjab lotteries does give us some sense of the complexity of this calculative reasoning, the overwhelming majority of contributors do not interrogate this aspect.

This brings me to a general observation about the volume: by truly living up to the claims of the title, the contributors have unearthed a whole new conceptual and empirical terrain that will hopefully generate research for many years to come. Yet the break with the concerns of the earlier traditions, especially political economy with its emphasis on issues of poverty, distribution, accumulation, and institutions of the market, is too conspicuous. Many of these concerns, about exploitation in the market, about the nature and trajectory of growth, about the ability of markets to provide decent livelihoods as well as the role of governments in facilitating and thwarting these outcomes are—to paraphrase Joan Robinson—too important to be left to the economists. Hopefully those who engage with the volume’s themes and who are simultaneously concerned about these questions will bring the two into conversation.

Finally, it is interesting to note that a book about markets does not contain a chapter focusing on what many think of when the word ‘market’ comes to mind: prices and price formation. This is perhaps also because of the rather unimaginative way in which the existing literature has thought about prices but it is also true that in recent years some excellent critical scholarship on the subject has emerged, looking at, for example, how global prices are set and their multiple meanings,⁷ the social relations, prices forges and constraints, and their fetishism,⁸ as well as contestations over notions of ‘fair pricing’ so relevant to global and local commodity chains.⁹ While one would not go so far as to say that studying markets without prices is akin to ‘Hamlet without the Prince’, given their importance, this is a curious omission.

Despite these minor oversights, this is a major work that should inform the discussion on South Asian exchange for many years to come.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

⁶Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁷Coray Caliskan, *Market threads: How cotton farmers and traders create a global commodity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸Stephen Gudeman, *Economy’s tension: The dialectics of community and market* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

⁹Stephen Ouma, *Assembling export markets: The making and unmaking of global food connections in West Africa* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015).