DEBATE

GAINS AND LOSSES IN THE MARGINS OF TIME: FROM WEST AND EQUATORIAL HISTORY TO PRESENT-DAY SOUTH AFRICA, AND BACK

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Ten years – eventful ones in our new century of intellectual and world experience – have passed since I published Marginal Gains in 2004. Reading the nine articles on the ‘popular economy’ in South Africa recently presented in Africa (Hull and James 2012) – several of which draw in one way or another on my own work – presents me with new momentum for revisiting and updating some of the lines of research and argument that we could be developing further. In fact, the L. H. Morgan Lectures, delivered at the University of Rochester, from which Marginal Gains was developed, were delivered in 1997, so the impulse to update should be even stronger. Also we need to extend the purview of this analytical and comparative work beyond Atlantic Africa, whose domestic and international economic history for several hundred years is so largely oriented towards trade and markets. South Africa is a particularly important case to bring into comparative study, with its hundred-year history of domination by the extractive industries and deliberate impoverishment of African popular economies until the 1990s, when new initiatives began to fill in gaps in the labour market and spaces in the economics of daily life. More and more of the continent is converging somewhere between the two models: a mix of extractive industry (and agriculture) dominated by international business (but counted in the official figures as part of the gross domestic product) and a ‘do-it-yourself’ sector based variously on customary-legal access to resources, expertise built up from the past, non-official modes of social mobilization, and sheer ingenuity within the increasingly intricate and not necessarily coherent interstices in what I called ‘formalities’ (Guyer 2004), in the plural.

In Atlantic Africa and elsewhere on the continent, an old, established popular sector is being brought into sharp confrontation with expanding capital-intensive presences. In South Africa, an old and powerfully established formal, capital-intensive sector deals with a newly emergent and experimental popular sector. This may be a different version of the same ‘interface’ that we put into the framework for our first collection on ‘money matters’ (Guyer 1995a) in West and Equatorial Africa, and that I took as the general historical backdrop to the analyses in Marginal Gains. Can our analytics work across these variously constructed and rapidly changing interfaces? These articles create an important and challenging opportunity to expand regional relevance and raise general

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theoretical issues – at a time when our terms are becoming pluralized, and in a context where the nature of the elementary, generative ‘forms’ from which futures can grow becomes a matter of declining confidence and growing trepidation.

There are two larger contexts in which our work would be important, which I mention briefly. First, although macro-policy is not a theme of this commentary, it is important to note that major political stakes now urge our attention to the productivity of popular economies in generating conditions of livelihood, safety, well-being and what Keith Hart has called ‘the human economy’ (Hart et al. 2010, and the work of the Human Economy Project, University of Pretoria). As critics are increasingly pointing out, for the West as well as for Africa, GDP statistics misrepresent this sector, and thereby the economy as a whole, by assuming implicitly that it is unproductive because its transactions are either not denominated in money or are not officially recorded and entered into government revenue sources. ‘According to estimates published by the IMF in 2002,’ Fioramonti writes, ‘informal economies accounted for up to 44 per cent of economic output in developing nations, 30 per cent in transition economies, and 16 per cent in the OECD countries’ (2013a; see also 2013b). The expansion of extractive industries has added greatly to the official figures for African GDP, but then combines with ‘poor numbers’ (Jerven 2013) on economic life more broadly to intensify the sense of a general poverty of life that looks as if it emanates from the popular sector itself rather than from the conditions of the interface with the formal sector, or simply from the distortions about distribution that are produced by the G(ross) aspect of GDP as adequately representing national and human economies together.

Second, it is worth noting that our work can become relevant beyond Africa as well. In a long review of Marginal Gains, Michel Callon (2008) extrapolated to claim that, in general, ‘Il n’y a d’économie qu’aux marges’ – ‘There is no economy except in the margins’, or perhaps better ‘What we call “economy” happens in the margins.’ His argument is that all profits are generated in gaps, and that these are increasingly intricately engineered: in the financial sector as well as the older productive sectors. In the tradition of actor network theory, he focuses on the techniques by which ‘devices’ are constructed and preserved in these margins. In a sense, his review was a call for us in African Studies to be more ambitious in our theoretical vistas.

At the convergence of these several instigations – puzzles left over from Marginal Gains; the newly insurgent situation in Africa as it becomes the ‘last frontier of capitalism’ (a Japanese book title, published in 2011, but the sentiment is widely imbued in recent literature); critiques of GDP and the rise of a ‘human economy’ approach – the ethnographic works under review here sharpen attention to an under-examined process, namely the temporalities of the interface. My basic metaphor for conversionary thresholds in Marginal Gains was spatial, based as it was on a revised geography of the pre-colonial trade of the Tiv, on the Nigerian central plateau. Only in the last chapter did I take on the thresholds in time that make for synchronies or slippages that also offer conversionary thresholds, in part because only in the formal economy does time become so

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1Fioramonti refers here to Schneider and Enste (2002).
intricately exact, contractual and recorded that there can be punishments for even a small deviation and rewards for the exertion of control.

Life in ‘the human economy’ is lived in nested rhythms, which we have tended to simplify into the ‘long run’ and the ‘short run’, as references here to Parry and Bloch’s (1989) collection point out. As the formal sector’s contractual and legal basis for a money economy based on interest-bearing debt becomes more dominant, how it creates temporal margins is crucial for short-run profit and loss – in business and in life. Time in the long run relates to duration in the process of asset formation: the upward conversion of monies, commodities, intangible goods and relationships from those whose value is unpredictable and perhaps ephemeral to those with enduring value retention. An asset is anything that is owned or controlled to produce value, going forward.

Working on a highly structured and policed interface, these articles make a strong contribution on time-as-margin as well as time-as-duration. Punctuated and calendrical time (Guyer 2007) are powerful here: in the legal contractual insistence on observance of dates, and in the rewards and damage caused by – deliberate? – delay or imposition, regardless of circumstance. With these concerns in mind, I can see throughout these richly empirical articles, more clearly than in the few blatantly illegal cases I indicated in 2004, the pervasive relevance of temporal regimes in a social economy where the formal presence is writ much larger than in the rest of Africa.

With more space and time, I would delineate (in higher profile) patterns in the scalar implications of the money/time equivalences and conversions that are so well evidenced in these articles. Inequality gaps are partly about durations. At the bottom, employment is temporary, houses are improvised, rights are contingent, some relationships are passing and not dependable, health is precarious, and getting anything at all ‘settled’ with the formal sector involves indeterminate waiting and extensive (and shifting) terms of qualification. People largely live in cash, which is a dwindling proportion of the total money supply. Many African currencies count as ‘soft currencies’, whose value on the exchange markets fluctuates (see Guyer 2012), so there is a logic to circulating them rapidly and converting them quickly upward into other money forms, commodities, symbolic forms and/or relationships that have more durable value. Hence, I think, the ‘conspicuous consumption’ that is noted in several of the articles. A fancy car is multi-functional – for current utility and holding and displaying value – in a way that the equivalent cash may not be. Several articles detect a sharp sensibility for using marginal possibilities to strengthen the assets in life that have durational qualities.

The articles offer many examples of transactional regimes-in-the-making. There is a recurrent sense that the financial and formal institutions are proliferating, even in emulation form (Krige), and ‘standardizing’ (McNeill), at the same time as the people are trying to ‘make a plan and take a chance’ (van Wyk), ‘manage risks in hitherto unthinkable ways’ (Bähre), create more than one way of earning money within the interstices and ‘borderlands’ (Bolt), and learning to live ‘in the prolonged states of limbo’ (Hull) that the formal sector creates. How quickly the shifts in practices and ideological formulations at particular interfaces can dislodge each other’s conditions of operation is well illustrated. The formal sector can seem predatory in its punishments. In such moments, then, how do people attempt to convert vulnerable holdings into durational assets, especially
when access to durational assets is precisely what the long-entrenched system parsed out so unequally?

In West and Equatorial studies we have developed a ‘wealth in people’ theme alongside ‘wealth in things’ (Guyer 1995b): networks, allies, dependable human resources, information, expertise and so on, all of them durational qualities and relationships that are cultivated and preserved at some expense. It seems to me that this is where the most innovative comparative and analytical work might focus: which ‘people’? Which kinds of ‘wealth’? In what combinations: of people with each other, and of people with things, like houses or vehicles? What sort of organizations result, supported by what ideologies? And how are they rendered durational into an extended ‘long run’? Or is this particular emergent popular economy less reliant on relationships that demand investment, but rather working its concatenations of people and things with a stronger emphasis on ‘wealth in things’ that necessarily tap into circuits that are unavoidably vulnerable to ‘inexorable’ (Neves and du Toit) dislocation by formalities (in the finance sector, for example)?

From the perspective of West and Equatorial African literature, one is quite struck, in the commentaries by Callebert and Seekings, by the prominence of an approach to ‘livelihood’ in South Africa in rather more material, ‘standard of living’, terms than the qualities of life and self-realization approaches that gain profile elsewhere. In his comment on Callebert’s review, Maxim Bolt suggests suspending this materialist emphasis: ‘Formal employment – and especially key forms of compounded labour and domestic work in South Africa – have shaped the worlds around them in ways that cannot be glossed simply as economic.’ Evidence can be teased out. Seekings writes that ‘The value of remittances has collapsed, as formally employed workers look after their immediate families rather than more distant kin.’ These are dynamics with respect to social assets: how wealth-in-people can still – or newly – work, and on what scale, at what expense, across the levels of wages and conditions of employment. Also across all forms of organization: from unions to political movements to neighbourhoods to congregations to families and to networks. And do the more ephemeral forms – ‘projects’ (Povinelli 2011) and ‘performances’ (Butler and Athanasiou 2013) – result in durational assets of some kind, such as benchmark symbols or mobilizable expertise?

The challenge of political position and policy making is palpable in this exchange. But analytically, I think there may be a possible meeting ground if the conditions of access to durational assets of all kinds were brought to the fore. I was struck by the concept of ‘disadvantage’ in this regard (Seekings). It is implicitly structural, processual and cultural all at the same time. If one took this now-conventional depiction of the ‘underclass’ and ‘poverty’ as ‘disadvantage’, and deconstructed it into its components, would a certain space–time–person–thing map emerge, with its own gaps and densely interconnected spots? In a book entitled Disadvantage (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007), a philosopher and a social scientist implicitly place strong emphasis on duration, by seeing ‘security’ as a central quality of ‘advantage’. They define ‘disadvantage’ as ‘lack of genuine opportunities for secure functionings’, and see it, explicitly, in the plural. Security is by definition a durational quality, requiring a whole gamut of qualities and quantities. At the bottom of the social scale, people do not simply constitute an ‘underclass’. Rather, they argue, ‘the primary disadvantage these people suffer is that they are subject to extreme risks’. It is the multiplicity, variety and
combinatorial compositions of such risks at the interface that then demand attention: blocks and channels, licences and regulations, neglect and deliberate ‘cutting the network’ (Strathern 1996), all of which can originate in what is ideologically presented as the ‘modern’, namely the formal sector. It actively interferes with human economy processes in many conjunctures, and it creates blind spots for knowledge about the future (such as the terms for petro-barter contracts). Impasses are expensive for those who get stuck in them. What can people create that endures? The West and Southern African research can meet over this question of the controls over time—punctuated and durational—in relation to well-being, as the combination of extraction, formality and popular aspirations to a human economy (of some sort) begin to more closely resemble one another across the continent.

REFERENCES