

Book Reviews

Book: Ouma, Stefan, 2015. *Assembling Export Markets: The Making and Unmaking of Global Food Connections in West Africa*. Wiley Blackwell.

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Value chains for a wide range of products have become ever more globalized in recent years. You are almost certainly wearing something made in a distant land, and it is likely that you will eat or drink something today that comes from another country. Starting in the 1980s with neoliberal moves to reduce subsidies and tariffs, efforts to promote free trade through the WTO and multilateral agreements (even if, as any good businessperson would remind you, nothing is “free”) have been bolstered by falling communication and transportation costs.

Part of this trend has been a dramatic rise in non-traditional agricultural exports to North America and Europe from parts of Latin America and Africa, especially high value (and labor intensive) items from snow peas and broccoli to French beans and organic mango. West Africa (as well as Kenya), in particular, has become a source for fresh produce for Europe.

In an interesting comparison, geographer Stefan Ouma looks at two different models of export agriculture in Ghana, one focused on organic mangos, the other on fresh-cut pineapple. He uses these case studies to ask bigger questions about how markets and supply chains are made in on-the-ground practices. Ouma makes a number of insightful connections between different theoretical traditions. He adopts a general approach from Latour’s actor-network theory, which he puts into conversation with economic sociology, Foucauldian perspectives on power and fluidity, and the extensive literature from anthropology and geography on global value chains.

Ouma’s project seeks to embed the abstracted purity of the market (as idea and theory) in the complexly multidimensional and often gritty reality of market making. He finds that they turn out to be as much fluid assemblages as rigid structures. “The world market is discursive, material, and social all at once,” he observes (13). Ouma argues that there are certain conceptual “universals” that, like the

market, are pure in the abstract, but are constituted by lots of messy and improvised instantiations. He focuses on the technologies and practices of producing markets, conceiving of them as “engaged universals.”

He harnesses this theoretical assemblage in pursuit of what he terms a “critical ethnography of marketization.” Markets are made by people, not given by nature, even if we sometimes treat them as the latter. Markets are a contrivance, a social construction, but they can also seem to control our lives. Ouma stresses the performative aspect of markets. (Actually, he prefers the term “performance” to index a Deleuzian reading of Foucault’s *dispositif*.)

Speaking to several different academic traditions, each with their own terminological peculiarities, is a difficult task. Ouma dives deep into the language of each to an extent that I (someone broadly familiar with the literature) got lost in the acronyms at times: “Rubbing ANT/the SSEM against the EC, as well as the anthropology of universals, produces productive friction” (49).

Ouma’s data come from two case studies of agro-export markets in Ghana. In the first firm, OFL, there is an expansion into organic mangos in northern Ghana. OFL promoted long-term contracts with a relatively small group of “out-growers,” and they made serious efforts to connect with the broader community and invest in projects with NGOs.

The other firm, TF, focused on just-in-time fresh pineapple production in the coastal region, with production subcontracted to a variable pool of small, medium, and large growers. TF promoted a family culture within the firm, with the complicated benefits and power imbalances that entails. (Ouma livens the text with a number of text boxes on interesting sideline questions, such as if TF’s farmers are classic smallholders or petty rural entrepreneurs.)

A series of crises besets both TF and OFL. TF’s model was thrown into chaos in 1996 when Del Monte introduced a game-changing product: MD2, the “secret weapon” of pineapples. It was more golden, sweeter, and had a longer shelf life than existing varieties; the market for other pineapples quickly dried up as supply chains rushed to switch to WD2. For TF, the turmoil resulted in lay-offs and a disrupted supply chain. OFL had their own problems: planting

mangos requires a significant and long-term investment by the outgrowers, and so lots of expensive incentives; this combined with rain and other environmental factors made it impossible to meet production targets.

This is all messy detail, but that is a key part of Ouma's argument: making markets is not neat and linear. It is complicated, with competing pulls and intentions, new forms for economic and labor disciplines, but also new subjectivities, as in farmers coming to value a mango tree with a sense of ownership that is affective as well as material.

Ouma's critical ethnography of marketization is a sort of Foucauldian history of the present, uncovering the workings and techniques of something that is mostly taken for granted. But making markets with smallholders is difficult and messy. These are not just rational actors ready to enter into a contract of mutual benefit, but farmers with their own designs on the future.

Ouma is writing in a very productive space, and he has laid out most of the pieces of a comprehensive theory. While I suspect he sees the connections clearly in his mind, he did not sufficiently tighten the threads to bring it all together for this reader. All the elements of a powerful framework are here, if not quite sufficiently linked to be fully convincing.

Nonetheless, I learned a lot reading this monograph, and find it to be a valuable addition to the commodity chain literature, providing sharp insights for thinking about critical ethnographies of markets and market making.

Book: Akos Rona-Tas and Alya Guseva. 2014. *Plastic Money: Constructing Markets for Credit Cards in Eight Postcommunist Countries*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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How do markets become at all possible? This question, asked in the beginning of and throughout Akos Rona Tas and Alya Guseva's book "Plastic Money," is arguably one of the key questions that distinguish economic sociology from other forms of inquiry into markets. Thus, while re-

maining an insightful and well-documented case study of the construction of a specific kind of market, namely markets for credit cards in Hungary, Poland, Czechia (as the Czech Republic currently wants to be known), Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Vietnam, and China, "Plastic Money" may be read as something more, an exemplary work with a more general message about of the sociotechnical construction of markets. To ask about the conditions of possibility of markets is to recognize that they are, fundamentally, the result of social practice. One important job of economic sociologists is to render visible and to analyze all the work that goes into making markets work, ranging from infrastructural innovations to political choices about legal regimes to hegemonic ideas of legitimization.

For economic sociologists and anthropologists interested in exploring the social dynamics of capitalism, the postsocialist transformation of the late 1980s and 1990s has afforded them a unique opportunity. In what Rona-Tas and Guseva call the "largest attempt in history to build markets" (xiii), entire economic systems were transformed. While many ideologues chose to frame these transformations in terms of an unproblematic "transition" from an aberrant system to a natural one, a lifting of the yoke on the organic propensity to truck and barter, there was of course nothing natural about the emerging economic organization. Just like the outgoing one, it was a tangle of competing interests and designs, each of which had its own geopolitical context. That context was also changing, with the weakening of Soviet influence and the increased influence of Western actors including the International Monetary Fund and advisors such as Jeffrey Sachs, whose team reformed the Polish economy from a room at the Warsaw Marriott. "The market" here is a detached idea which has yet to be enacted in practice. Rona-Tas and Guseva frame this process by juxtaposing the Weberian notion of an ideal type with Callonian performativity; this is a story of the American blueprint for a workable credit card market remaking the formerly socialist space in its image. (Evidence from the US serves usefully as a counterpoint to many of the analyses in the book). While much of the scholarship attends to the functional rules of working, embedded markets, Rona-Tas and Guseva attend to generative rules and non-market interventions aimed at fostering markets, which are in the process of becoming embedded.

The book is organized into seven chapters and a conclusion, and it will be useful to a broad readership in economic sociology. It takes up one of the key artifacts of consum-

er capitalism, the credit card, and rightly reframes it as less thing than infrastructure. Credit cards are not only a means of dematerialized payment, but also nodes in the vast apparatus of consumer credit. The early chapters focus on the similarities in the postsocialist predicament in the various countries – little legacy of consumer lending, the creation of commercial banks by way of privatization and the influx of foreign capital, macroeconomic instability – while the later chapters offer in-depth studies of the specificities of the construction of credit markets in different markets. Those interested in the globalization of consumer finance will find evidence here that while the forces of standardization and rationalization are powerful, they must face up to local forms of recalcitrance and path-dependence, which do modify the original blueprint. Extremely well-researched and documented, “Plastic Money” attends to these modifications not in a naïve praise of local difference, but rather in recognition of the social forces that need to be brought to bear on the complex social reality if it is to be rendered “flat” enough for the system to work.

In the most theoretically compelling sections of the book, chapters 3 and 4, Rona-Tas and Guseva narrate this process as a series of payment and credit puzzles that the architects of the credit card markets faced as they were setting them up. Say you swipe your Visa card in a grocery store in Sophia. Rona-Tas and Guseva elucidate two things about such an event: its present complexity and its historical genealogy. There is money transferred between multiple banks, but not just you and the grocer are actors. There are several further intermediaries, and they want to be paid too, for investing in and maintaining the interchange infrastructure, for sorting through the databases to make sure you are creditworthy. While there are multiple banks, they all agreed to use and accept Visa – why? And how did the terminal find its way to the grocer and the card to you anyway, given the enduring presence of cash? Working with such questions, Rona-Tas and Guseva first look at the payment function, which unites credit cards with debit cards and other technologies. Here they show how both the dual success in proliferating the technology, among cardholders and among merchants, is owed to the intervention of postsocialist states rather than to some emergent market order. Similarly, it is the corporate power of multinationals coupled with the political power of the state that ensures an effective duopoly of Visa and MasterCard. This point helpfully enriches the pragmatist debates on market devices and payment technologies.

From the payment function, “Plastic Money” moves to the credit function. It focuses on the key issue in lending without collateral: generating knowledge about the borrower in order to calculate risk, given the uncertain future of repayment. In societies with no individual credit histories and with an inefficient collection industry, again the practitioners in search of security needed to go beyond the market. Rather than take the American mass-market route, they relied on legacies of status tied to a particular bank.

Taken together, these insights make for a compelling study of the social embeddedness of markets understood not as a given, but as a fragile accomplishment in a historical process. Whether read as a study of market creation set in countries such as Hungary or Vietnam or as a contribution to the socioeconomic history of postsocialist transformation, “Plastic Money” works well in attending to institutions and social relations that uphold the credit card markets. Against this background, a certain downplaying of cultural factors and consequences is a bit surprising. Given how strongly consumer credit is entangled with shifting understandings of the social contract and welfare after socialism, and given how thoroughly the new ideal of creditworthiness meshes with new capitalist forms of personhood, it might be worth wondering about the efficacy of cultural meanings surrounding credit cards in making their markets possible.

Book: *Capital Without Borders: Wealth Managers and the One Percent*. Brooke Harrington. 2016. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

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There is a discernible pattern to the study of the international industry of tax evasion and avoidance. First phase studies were concerned primarily with tax havens, largely small island economies that serve, in the words of Richard Murphy, as secrecy havens. We have a learned lot about these havens in the past two decades. Mostly we learned that they are viewed by their clients as little more than bundles of regulations and taxations rules, disembodied from their geography, culture, and sometimes even their politics. An ecological metaphor is an apt description of these jurisdictions. There is an arms race going on among

the flora of this ecology, a beauty contest in which each of them is seeking to attract business by offering their own distinct flowering colours and scents, their own distinct bundle of regulation and taxation. But like beautiful flowers in a valley, they are territorially static, ultimately reliant on the insects to make their choices. In the world of offshore banking, vital choices are made not by the tax havens, nor by their clients, but rather by an army of professional enablers: the accountants, the lawyers, the financiers, and as Brooke Harrington describes in this book, a newish type of profession, professional wealth managers. Harrington's book is an important contribution to the second-phase study of the international industry of tax evasion and avoidance, the study of the enablers of that world.

The wealth management industry has never been studied systematically before. Harrington sets out to present a full portrait of the industry: the sort of people that get involved in it, the individuals they serve, and their goals and worries and the methods they use. She opts for the scenic route. Instead of relying on existing literature, theory, and surmising about the nature of this industry, she has learned about the business from the inside, and she speaks to the people involved as colleagues. Her findings appears to me to be accurate, thorough, highly critical, and yet surprisingly empathetic to her subject. She prefers to tell the story through the individuals that are involved in it, and yet she

relies judiciously on vast tracts of theory; but she does so in a nuanced and gentle manner. Here she traces some of the current practices back to the long history of European thought, leading us back to the Crusades and the High Middle Ages. From there she carries the reader along with few very well-chosen words through recent sophisticated cultural theories. Never does the overall trajectory of the narrative get lost. And so we find that although this industry is dedicated to serving the world's wealthiest, the one percent – or to be more accurate, the one percent of the one percent of the world's population – it is an industry that is oddly very modern and yet positions itself largely as a defence mechanism against change. An industry that prides itself on its discretion and conservatism, and yet it helps perpetrate inequality on a global scale. It is an industry that views itself as a wealth preservation industry, but it is the preservation of wealth by and for individuals, often at the expense of the potential wealth of society. The techniques used for tax avoidance and wealth preservation are highly sophisticated, relying largely on breaks and loopholes in the international regulatory environment and arbitraging one set of rules against the other in support of a wealthy clientele. This is a unique book. I learned something new on practically every page, not to mention the fact that Brooke Harrington really knows how to tell a story.