

## Labour reading group – Introductory comments by Susanne:

### Text on Dispossession by Kasmir & Carbonella

Article tries to understand the workings of capitalism, how capitalism makes its “other”, by looking at the continuities rather than the changes in the relation between workers/capitalists. I see it as a complementary text to Tsing’s article, which focusses on the transformations of capitalism and the continuous production of new “identities” of workers – to the degree that they do not identify themselves as such anymore at all. I remember that we asked questions about the continuities in capitalism when we read the Tsing article, and whatever happened to class in the “new capitalism”. So this article is in a way about this. Whereas Tsing sees real change in how capitalism works, this article sees at best mutations – with the overarching, or central, principle being not so much exploitation, but dispossession. Class is here analysed as a structural phenomenon, showing that class is constantly reproduced by the “othering” of capitalism through mechanisms of dispossession, while the same mechanism also results in the fact that different groups of dispossessed do not see themselves as sharing a similar “class position” (e.g. unionized workers and “poor”). While Tsing shows how outsourcing is part of a neoliberal agenda that seeks to exploit different legal frameworks and ‘cultural differences’ around the globe, and that allows companies to “wash their hands” in terms of the conditions of labour and its social reproduction (other people’s responsibility), this article demonstrates that such “othering” has always been part of the politics of dispossession that are at the heart of capitalism. The authors argue that it is the hegemonic opposition between “the stable working class” and the poor (lumpenproletariat) (taken and reproduced on by anthropologists) that has blocked the possibility to perceive these two groups as part of the same class position, i.e. existing within the same matrix of accumulation by dispossession within the capitalist system. It shows how in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris (and elsewhere) the categories of empire (civilized/savage) were repatriated to “mark out” workers.

*Dispossession* is Harvey’s reformulation of Marx’ concept of primitive accumulation, which basically talked about the process by which both capital and labourer emerged in an “original moment”, by displacement of the latter from their original means of livelihood and social reproduction, e.g. land. As land became a commodity and the original basis of capital, “livelihood-less” workers had to sell their labour in order to survive, creating new forms of social relations in the process. Harvey shows that recurrent “crises of overaccumulation” lead to new processes of dispossession, and the creating of new (dehumanized?) “others” beyond national boundaries. Yet the authors criticize Harvey “ahistorical presumptions” for it obscures what is important in terms of an anthropology of labour: the mutability of “workers types” through time, and the figure of the “privileged worker as a particular historical type” (rather than a static category). Such a focus allows viewing apparently disparate struggles (of workers against plant closure, of peasants against land expropriation) together and within one framework. The text also shifts the focus from the logic of capital profit making to the worker’s situation as one with which capital has to reckon as well. “Crises” are also produced by the historical gains of working classes (which is then followed by dispossession). Disorganization (i.e. the destabilization of lifeworlds, but also the destruction of unions) is part of dispossession, as is cultural displacement. Processes are found in both North and South. They see different responses by different (ethnic/racial) groups to dispossession in the US as conditioned by the shadow of hunger, and different strategies on how to avoid best to go hungry again. It is this was the article about – how can we understand the segmentation of the working class (its split into

various others) and its self-identification as part and parcel of a hegemonic process of dispossession (hegemonic understood here as a dialectic of force and consent), and what is needed to overcome such separations? People are today making new connections in new forms of global struggle (i.e. in the Battle of Seattle where protesting farmers came together with unionised workers etc) and these connections underline the need for a decolonized anthropology.

**Text on Wage Hunting at the Margins of Urban Japan** is from book called "Lilies of the Field. Marginal people who live for the moment" which focusses on one commonality among marginal people, the apparent absence of future and past as reference points for life projects, and cultural practices shaped by this 'presentism' which are also a form of resistance against institutions of the state and church. Find patterns of immediate return that is likened to hunter/gatherer mentality, as well as a perspective on the world as shaped by abundance. I chose this article because one could read this interestingly in the light of the model lined out in the Kashmir article. Suggests that the politics of dispossessing create "poor" / disorganized/ culturally displaced people also in one ('rich') country (Japan), at the same time a very "stable workers' aristocracy" is created (represented here by the salesman) and how a particular time-space matrix of dispossession plays itself out in the individual and collective time-space orientation of this marginal people. (I.e. – are they Japan's "People Without History"?) Day Labourers live at the outskirts in particular settlements together with other "outcast" – prostitutes, mentally handicapped, even blind people. Might be seen as victims of a Japanese model of capitalism, which builds on creating "extreme" types: extremely integrated workers, for whom the company cares for "like a family", on the one hand, and the extreme other, the super flexible, detached and family-less labour of day worker. But day laborers interestingly also describe their life in terms of choices, as free in contrast to that of the salesman. Have no families (chosen disorganization?), and a cultural orientation in the here and now (chosen cultural displacement?). They seem *de facto* to live a different time-place matrix, complete with different values and types of relationships, even if this is a consequence of dispossession. Rest of article explores the different features of living in the present, do not think about future which is only troublesome. Yet they do gamble, which seems to indicate that there is at least some hope for another life and of getting out of situation their without having to be a "slave" (if gambling is not *only* diversion). Although there might be similarities with "immediate return" societies, their forms of sharing and time frames have developed in dependency on a capitalist model, while those of hunter and gatherers have not. Their model is based on denial of family life, prestige, sexual gratification, safety etc. Families care about them only after death, but that seems to be relevant in their life nevertheless. Unattached/limited engagement with employers appears also a form of resistance against capitalist intrusions. Conventions and distinctions of mainstream society do not apply. "Others" of capitalism do remain partly outside of it, and that seems here to produce also a sort of freedom, yet at a high price.

**Comments from others (PLEASE ADD)**

**Christian:** Kashmir article is inspired by Eric Wolf, focusses on connections between people. Find interesting that politics of dispossession are not just economically relevant, but socially and culturally as well. Find history of the term dispossession interesting as it constitutes relation between people and property rights in a particular way. Find Kashmir's quote of Harvey's book on Paris interesting, how categories of empire were used at the centre to describe working class, shows how racialized production of difference in the colonies shaped and reshaped class in the center. In the article on Japan I found interesting that this very masculine economy of "free" day labourers is apparently disappearing, and being culturally displaced to the service sector, undertaken by young and female. I.e., female work, which is divided also along age lines. There seem to be links to Tsing's article.

**Marit:** In the article on Japan I wondered how "free" these people are, as author does not describe the recruitment process. Found interesting the relation to death and kinship, shows that these people can be inside and outside of a community at the same time. What I found interesting in the first article is that people talk again about accumulation, as there is lots of work done on capitalism without description of accumulation processes, where the money is going. Interesting where notion of dispossession leads us, understood disorganization as alienation of culture and consciousness. Interesting to see what are the conditions of abstract notions of solidarity and class. What has that to do with de-colonizing anthropology? They are very different notions of such a project around, for example Arturo Escobar's concept of political ontologies (and a decolonial anthropology) seems very different. **Christian:** What they are interested in is the historical division of labour in university and academia between sociology and anthropology, who used to study different sets of people and relations. Not many anthropologists do study unions in industrial societies, for example. **Susanne:** I think they mean it as a critique of the continued "othering" being done by anthropologists, that focuses on the presentation of fundamental difference rather than questioning this difference. Point is that people are themselves seem to be seeking to "get together" in new social movements. It seems to me that Kashmir et al. suggest that some kind of dismantling of ideology in a Marxist should be done by anthropologists by focussing on material histories (also when it comes to the representations of their *subjects*).

**Astrid:** I find the term dispossession interesting because it focuses on the processes and practices that make class, rather than starting with class categories. How does dispossession produce new categories, new differences? Interesting model how to understand the diversification of working class. Class interests can be seen as something objective vs something subjective and affective. For example, oil workers in Norway vote often for the FRP and are very rich. Are they dispossessed? Workers' aristocracy? Can we understand this in relation to New Public Management and the deregulation of labor market and increased use of temporary workers? Are there processes of dispossession in Norway that are leading to more differences? In relation to the article on Japan, the oppositional identities are linked to the question of choice and free will, so what are the dynamics of force and consent, dispossession and privilege? Oppositional identities These laborers are dispossessed, but present themselves as privileged in terms of freedom to choose when and how to work. It would be interesting to discuss dispossession in relation to affect. I am surprised by the lack of solidarity, friendship, moral community – that the day laborers don't make new forms of relatedness among themselves.

**All:** Some discussion on the notion of others produced by dispossession, about whether they are inside capitalism, or not? Marit suggests it would have been better if they had made clear what kind

of relation of othering they were talking about. Interesting in Gill's article is the localised form of a politicised identity struggle he describes.

**Ingjerd:** how can we understand similar forms of othering that do not relate to capitalist economies?

**Astrid:** What about processes of repossession? How property changes hand? Also through migration, as part of family obligations, or settlers in frontier regions taking possession of natural resources?

### **Penny's written comments**

Oslo - Labour reading group - October 10th

#### **In general:**

I read the Gill article on 'wage hunting' first and found it very interesting - I liked the ethnographic detail, and the focus on modes of reciprocity but I also found myself wanting a stronger theoretical argument. The Kasmir & Carbonella promised this framing (and it was great to read these two articles together) but I found it very frustrating. The switch of register to a determinedly class analysis seemed to erase the possibility for ethnographic complexity (despite claims to the contrary).

The on-going challenge of re-scaling the ethnographic is perhaps mirrored in the political challenge to work beyond the immediacy of specific labour struggles to articulate a wider movement. Is the focus of the descriptive work important here - finding a site - such as 'the supply chain' that disrupts established typologies or scalar differences?

Tom Gill: Wage Hunting at the Margins of Urban Japan.

The Japan article carries the affect focus forward in interesting ways - perhaps above all at the end with the suggestion that new forms of casual labour (the move from displaced men, to the 'free labour' of women) remove the possibilities for affective bonds between casual workers. But the article stops short because the new regime is not described or presented - it is presented as the destruction rather than the transformation of the previous one. I wonder about these conclusions - what forms of solidarity and community are women involved in? Are they in families, in other neighbourhoods - are these modes of association that are not simply predicated on the precarity of casual labor?

I think the article raised questions about labour (as an embodied practice) and poverty/vulnerability as a condition, a way of life that does not necessarily involve labour. The figure of the volunteer also appears (126) - it would have been interesting to know more about the work - the labour (?) - of the volunteer, and their determined future orientation as they seek to transform the lives of others. This tension in temporal orientation was very interesting and one I've come across in development contexts.

The ambivalence about salary work, and the value of freedom was interesting. I'm not 100% convinced about the hunter/gatherer analogy - the sharing vs exchange might be a connection - but determined refusal of kinship in the yoseba is surely a strong point of contrast.

Finally I was interested by the discussion of welfare and the claim that there is no contradiction in going on welfare because day laborers do not predicate their identity on work - what do they predicate it on? On precarity with respect to both work and kinship/family - but in a social situation where the lack of relational stability in combination with enduring poverty is lived through an ethos of sharing and a determined focus on the present. There was more to explore there I think.

Kasmir and Carbonella

I'm afraid I found this article rather frustrating. There seemed to be too many arguments that cut across each other.

Dispossession - the argument seems to be that dispossession is a useful analytic because it does not start from particular (static) class categories but captures the 'fluid movement of real people in real contexts' - and highlights the ambiguities between local struggles and wider social processes. But 'class' constantly returns in this piece - at times conflated with particular forms of labour, at times with poverty. In short the writers seem uncertain as to whether class is a category of labour and if so how exactly. For example on page 15 - following the fascinating description of the criminalising effects of the regulation of wage labour and the division of wage labourers and wageless poor - the deployment of the category of the 'river working class' seems to side-step the more challenging question of how to work with the notion of dispossession without invoking an apriori and thus stable notion of class.

The categorical fixes of the state are mirrored by the categorical fixes of the analysis - and I wonder if this is because of a lack of ethnographic detail - might an ethnographic project allow the emergence of other modes of association, and draw out the specificity of ambivalent and conflicting affective regimes (such as were suggested by the Japanese study). The suggestion to think with Brecht is interesting here - as is the discussion of Harvey's ambivalence around the Cowley workers.

Poverty is equally problematic - (page 6) - the critique of those who attend to 'the poor' - is based on the representation of people as poor rather than as unemployed or underemployed - but this focus equates poverty to employment. While certainly not wanting to argue against the notion that labour markets (in their structural complexity) produce poverty - I would prefer a richer sense of livelihood.

I was also unconvinced by the argument that anthropology studies those 'outside' capitalism - or the recently ravaged. I can't see how this claim was plausible in 2008? The authors do not seem to have taken on board what anthropology found problematic about class.