

Editorial Foreword

THE PROLETARIAT AND THE COMMODITY, IN COMPARISON

Few terms from the Marxian lexicon have been as prolific, or the literature surrounding them as prolix, as the proletariat and the commodity. The terms have long been allowed free range, as though universals, though they were born of a specific nineteenth-century European milieu. From there they have been borrowed and extended on analogical loan, so to say, into new comparative frames. Mostly, though, the procedures and rules of loan and extension remain unmarked and unnoticed. **James Ferguson** names and analyzes the typical “analogical associations” by which *the proletariat* crosses domains, places, and times, and he argues that creative reform is needed. Taking the case of South Africa, he shows how the development of an industrial working class there resembles less a nineteenth-century European paradigm than it does the case of ancient Rome, from which Marx first took the word “proletarian.” In ancient Rome, the proletarian did not look much like a self-conscious wage-earning class. Instead, its profile was that of a group deprived of property or sustaining work, and assuaged mostly via patronage and a politics of intermittent largesse. Ferguson shows how that view of the proletarian better describes today’s South Africa, and many other places too, than does Marx’s depiction.

Laurence Coderre reveals an analogous disjuncture for the term, “commodity.” What is *the commodity* outside of capitalism? How should we think about the apparent oxymoron of “the socialist commodity”? Coderre shows how Maoist China read the commodity as a necessary transitional evil, something that had to be managed, but not eliminated. To conceptualize this socialist commodity required a developed theory drawing on ideas of Stalin, among others. Coderre carefully unpacks this alternative genealogy of the socialist commodity. She invites us to rethink Chinese history through the prism of the socialist commodity, a term applied to making political economy relevant to the masses in China and, even more importantly, as a link from Stalin to Mao, and from Mao to “age of Deng” reforms, and then to the present.

HISTORY GATHERS IN TREES AND STREETS Chronotopes pool time and place in tangible sites and things. They make histories present and available to our awareness. Distinct kinds of places and things anchor history differently, pushing it down one or another thematic track or trail. Even more, the objects elevated in one society or another as important chronotopic markers, worthy and significant, tell us something about that people and what they value. In this section, our authors consider trees in Ghana, and

street art in ancient Rome and Renaissance Florence. In “Sylvan Memories of People, Place, and Trees in Nangodi, Northeastern Ghana,” **Elisha P. Renne** digs among the roots of ancients—baobab, teak, silk cottonwood, ebony, nettle, mahogany—as they mediate memory, lineage, visions of land-use, and forms of sociality. Like Victor Turner’s milk tree for the Ndembu, these trees communicate value, and bridge eras: precolonial, colonial, and post-independence.

Garrett Ryan’s essay, “Street Theater: Building Monumental Avenues in Roman Ephesus and Renaissance Florence,” pivots between Ephesus and Florence to compare street monuments, and monumental streets, as performance spaces announcing identity, value, and the aspirational social order. Streets were negotiated by nobles, elites, and the general citizenry, but despite their contested nature, they reveal discernible patterns. Working comparatively, Ryan shows how streets and statuary, and their ceremonial uses, served to constitute and naturalize new versions of authority through, paradoxically, aesthetic appeals to “tradition” and longstanding community.

MORAL CODES OF STATES IN TRANSITION States in transition have to be legitimated. The new order must justifiably supersede a previous regime, and that process is more complex than it seems on the face of it. It requires not only the creation but also the performance of morality, a performance that must appear as compelling to the citizenry within as to members of other states without. “On the face of it” is exactly the locution put in question by **Saygun Gökariksel**. Sovereignty is fragile and often in itself faceless; it requires a target, a face held in frame. In his essay, “Facing History: Sovereignty and the Spectacles of Justice and Violence in Poland’s Capitalist Democracy,” he explores the process of revealing the faces of enemies and perpetrators as a technique of sovereignty. Rituals of the ceremonial unmasking of enemy faces frequently accompany state transitions. They provide a visual moral reckoning, as “justice.” Gökariksel shows how such visual displays of “transitional justice” help stimulate sentiments of moral purity and victimhood, fortifying the new sovereign order. But there is a dark side: they are easily exploited by right-wing propagandists in the post-socialist period, as transpired in Poland and Hungary, among other places.

Miles Larmer’s “Nation-Making at the Border: Zambian Diplomacy in the Democratic Republic of Congo” dives into a different context of moral codes and state-making, namely post-independence Africa. Like Gökariksel, Larmer points to the ways nations are made and maintained through moral claims as much as through the control of territory and boundaries. But moral and territorial claims converge, he shows, in the problem of morality in the borderlands, in contested zones where national identity is particularly fraught. Larmer’s work unpacks these issues on the periphery joining Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the period surrounding Northern Rhodesia’s metamorphosis into Zambia in 1964. How was “Zambianness” asserted and

entrenched in that crucial moment, among peoples for whom that identity was strange, and only one among several contestants to possible national identity? State officials linked moral ideas of Zambian patriotism with familiar moral notions of chiefly patriarchy, marital fidelity, and rural ties to the land to give shape to the otherwise abstract idea of the nation.

In “State-Building after Disaster: Jiang Tingfu and the Reconstruction of Post-World War II China, 1943–1949,” **Rana Mitter** considers the ideas and motivations for state reconstruction in the wake of disaster. After the war, Chinese reconstruction was articulated variously in terms of communism, nationalism, or transnationalism in various Soviet and American models. But international assistance was above all carried out in morally inflected terms like public hygiene, poverty, development, modernity, and vulnerability, each of which carried its own implications for China’s future.

“CULTURE” VS. “RELIGION” IN EUROPEAN ISLAM “Culture” and “religion” are both vexed comparative and analytical terms. No surprise, then, that an enormous literature exists deconstructing each of them independently. Still, both enjoy a wide vernacular following and a vital social realness quite apart from the cautions of scholars, whose demons vis-à-vis the terms are legion. And academic hesitations carry slight weight against national, music, touristic, and heritage industries devoted to the global proliferation of “culture” and “religion.” Too few scholars have carefully examined these words’ intercalibrations. **Jeannette S. Jouili** undertakes this project in her essay, “Islam and Culture: Dis/junctures in a Modern Conceptual Terrain.” She writes from a context where the lines drawn around culture and religion matter and are under constant duress. European Muslims face a recognition problem. In what terms, if any, can they secure legitimate, legal, protected presence in European states? Jouili detects two main “culture” threads. One is devoted to modernity, expression, and a burgeoning scene of “Islamic arts.” The other is beholden to romantic ideals of tradition, authenticity, and inherited custom, yet these risk being glossed in Europe as retrograde and backward. Jouili sheds needed light on the nature of the so-called “new European culturalism,” on local European and transnational demarcations of religion and culture, and on what is at stake in the difference. Timely reading.
