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Makovicky, Nicolette and Henig, David (2016) Introduction: Re-imagining Economies (after Socialism): Ethics, Favours, and Moral Sentiments. In: Henig, David and Makovicky, Nicolette, eds. *Economies of Favour After Socialism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 1-20. ISBN 978-0-19-968741-1.

DOI

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Introduction: Re-imagining Economies (after Socialism)

Ethics, Favours, and Moral Sentiments

Nicolette Makovicky and David Henig

In June 2013, the British-Pakistani businessman James Caan was appointed the United Kingdom's first 'social mobility tsar' by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Stating that job prospects should not depend on 'who you know rather than what you can do', Caan directed fierce criticism at wealthy parents who used their influence to secure employment and training opportunities for their offspring. Soon after his appointment, however, it emerged that one of his daughters occupied no fewer than three roles within his own business empire. Defending himself from the ensuing accusations of hypocrisy, Caan declared that he had 'taken on his daughter' in order to give her the opportunity to 'identify what was right for her'. What others saw as nepotism and favouritism, in other words, he saw as the duty of any caring father. And where others bristled at the arrogance of privilege, he presented the natural instinct to support his child in her voyage of self-discovery. Caan's story serves to remind us that favours—big and small—constitute a pervasive, often habitual dimension not only of kinship, but also of social relations more generally. Giving someone a 'helping hand' is a universal currency which builds political alliances and oils market transactions everywhere from the 'favour economy' of middle-class New Yorkers (Bellafante 2013), to the old-boy networks of the global 'shadow elite' (Wedel 2009). Caan's apparent inability to recognize the paradox between his words and his actions (and their moral evaluation by others), however, highlights the fact that it is only when such gestures counter public norms or personal interests that we pause to acknowledge their social, economic, and political significance.

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This book focuses on favours, and the paradoxes of action, meaning, and signification they engender. As such, it forms a first engagement with a concept that has long been a taken-for-granted—and rather ill-defined—aspect of social theory. This relative neglect stands in contrast to continental philosophy, which has explored the idea of gratuity at length (Derrida 1992; Levinas 1996; Marion 2002). According to the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers, this omission is grounded in the discipline’s epistemological roots in functional explanations. In one of the few articles on the subject, he notes that such explanations read ‘the significance of human actions on the basis of expressed intentions, without examining their *mode* of expression; reducing each institution to “what it amounts to” or “what it does” in terms of practical results, ignoring its cultural roots’ (2011, 424–5, emphasis added). Indeed, uncomfortable with the notion of gratuity, much anthropological and sociological work has previously retreated to the comfort zone of classical exchange theory (Mauss 1925), redescribing gratuitous behaviour as the fulfilment of social obligations, or as carrying a hidden element of calculated self-interest (see Widlok 2013). This recourse to the language of exchange highlights the fact that favours make for particularly slippery ethnography. They confound not only the principles of economic rationality, but also two basic axioms of anthropological thought: the Maussian notion that the principle of reciprocity is the basis for all sociality (see Hunt 2000; Sigaud 2002; Weiner 1992), and the assumption that economic equivalence is the condition for all exchange, and thus social equity is therefore established through exchange itself (see Strathern 1992). And yet, as any ethnographer well knows, simple gestures of kindness generate social warmth and are thus undoubtedly part of the fabric of everyday social life: every salutation and ‘thank you’ uttered, saying ‘grace’ before and after meals, or leaving a tip on a café table for the waitress are all recognitions of social favour between individuals, and all belong to the family of gratuitous acts (Pitt-Rivers 2011, 425). Gratuitous action, in other words, is part and parcel of the ‘sympathy’ which underpins social relations, to use the words of Adam Smith (1759).

This observation forms the theoretical point of departure for our present collection of essays. Drawing on ethnographic material from across the Eurasian landmass, the contributors to this volume treat favours (and the carrying out of favours) as a distinct *mode of acting*, rather than as a form of ‘masked’ exchange or simply an expression of goodwill. Casting our comparative net from Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe to the former Soviet Union, Mongolia, and post-Maoist China, we show how gratuitous behaviour shapes a plethora of different actions, practices, and judgements across religious and economic life, creative and imaginative practices, and local moral economies. Tackling subjects as diverse as the role of bribery in Mongolian education to Muslim perceptions of virtuous deeds in rural Bosnia, we refocus our attention

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from functional questions of exchange and reciprocity to questions about the ethical and expressive aspects of human life. This does not mean that we regard gratuitous behaviour as uniformly benign or altruistic. Rather, it means that we see the examination of favours as a way to study the moments of ‘ethical reflection, reasoning, dilemma, doubt, conflict, judgement, and decision’ that punctuate everyday life and experience (Laidlaw 2014, 23), and yet are often challenging to evidence. Like all other gestures, we argue, favours have existential (as well as social and material) significance: they are constitutive of, rather than external to, the persons and relations of those who give and receive (Englund 2008, 36). Consequently, we do not aim to offer any formal definition of the favour, but treat it instead as a ‘polythetic category’ (Needham 1975), that is, as ‘a phenomenon which involves a constellation of features, not all of which are necessarily present in any particular instance’ (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992, 2) and with ‘no single criterion universal to all members’ (Lambek 2013, 4).

Our approach signals a radical departure from conventional uses of the term in the academic literature on contemporary Eurasia. Indeed, while it is almost absent from general social science literature, the ‘favour’ has long played a central role in the analytical and descriptive vocabulary of publications on the socialist and post-socialist ecumene. Scholars of post-Soviet politics, for example, have often used ‘favour’ as a byword for corruption and clientelism, reading personalized power networks as symptomatic of an absence of legal and political transparency (Giordano and Hayoz 2013; Kurkchian and Galligan 2003; Ledeneva 2013). Taking a broadly political-economic approach, others have used the term to describe the personal connections and informal exchanges of ordinary citizens, observing that informal practices of various kinds are embedded in the social fabric and moral imagination of populations across the region (Dunn 2004; Patino 2008). Indeed, documenting the networking practices of Soviet citizens, Alena Ledeneva (1998) coined the term ‘economies of favour’ to describe their ubiquitous use of personal relations to get hold of scarce goods and services in times of shortage. For scholars of socialist and post-socialist Eurasia, in short, the ‘favour’ has long been academic shorthand for those actions which appear to mix instrumental and affective relations, goal-oriented and gift exchanges, and ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ institutional ties. From bribery and patronage to customary exchange and kinship relations, favours have been treated as primarily economic acts (rather than primarily as social acts). This focus on transaction and exchange has often led scholars to overlook the fact that such favours are mediated by the rhetoric of friendship and mutuality, making them less ‘an economy’ and more a system of sociality and a moral aesthetic of action.

Our appropriation of Ledeneva’s phrase for the book’s title, then, is not a reflection in our belief in the unbroken continuity of practices of corruption

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and patronage in the post-socialist world. Rather, it is meant to foreground our intention to critically re-interrogate the conceptual relations between the categories of ‘favour’ and ‘economics’ themselves. Favours, we contend, do not operate ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ the economic sphere. Instead, they constitute a distinct mode of action which has economic consequences, without being fully explicable in terms of transactional cost-benefit analysis. Consequently, rather than simply aiming to ‘re-embed’ economic activity in the classical anthropological fashion, the contributors to this volume seek to understand how the economy itself is imagined, expressed, practised, and cosmologically framed by different actors in the region. As such, they take into account not only localized dynamics and norms of exchange and reciprocity, but also the social efficacy of ‘moral sentiments’ (Smith 1759) and ‘ordinary ethics’ (Lambek 2010), and their modes of expression in everyday economic practice. Exploring the distinctive conceptual potential of the favour for ethnographic analysis, the chapters in this volume reflect a wider engagement with recent anthropological work on questions of ethics, freedom, and moral sentiment (e.g. Laidlaw 2013; Keane 2015). They show how favours arise in situations and moments in social life where individuals elicit the permissiveness of others, and how they are central to the social production of pride, respectability, and self-worth. Thus, without dismissing the legitimacy of the conventional political-economic approaches to the subject, this volume seeks to introduce a new conceptual terminology to the study of favours, which includes affect, humour, mutuality, generosity, as well as conflict, competition, and questionable legality. Indeed, considering ‘economies of favours’ as productive of sociality as well as material value, the chapters that follow provide vivid insights into the way that the social and cultural imagination is itself put to work in everyday life.

Our enquiry, in other words, is driven by the question of how giving serious consideration to gratuitous action might allow for the re-imagining of contemporary modes of thinking and writing about economic orders. Consequently, our aim is not simply to stage an intervention into the existing literature on contemporary Eurasian societies and to provide a new theoretical angle from which to revisit older work on socialist and post-socialist ‘economies of favour’. It is also—in some small way—to contribute to the wider search for alternative economic paradigms which have preoccupied activists, policy-makers, and social scientists since the onset of the global economic crisis (Coase 2012; Graeber 2013). In fact, anthropologists have long been producing work critical of mainstream political economics, as well as neo-classical approaches to economics. The discipline’s stubborn attachment to Polanyi’s substantivism and (Marxist) political economy, however, has previously ensured that such critiques remained marginal. The prominence now given to questions of austerity and social inequality, however, has brought the

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concerns of economists closer to those traditionally occupying anthropologists (Picketty 2013; Stiglitz 2012), as well as bringing anthropology into the heart of the finance and fiscal governance (Tett 2009; Holmes 2014; Maurer 2011). It has also led to a rediscovery of some of the fundamental anthropological categories of economic analysis—such as barter, debt, and the gift—by academics and audience well beyond the discipline (Liebersohn 2011; Graeber 2011; Sedlaček 2011). One of the central aims of this volume is to include favours on this list of economic universals. Before considering this, however, we start by saying something about a rather classic theme that runs throughout the chapters, namely the tension between what we might call the *oughts* and *ares* in human life—that is, between social norms and individual actions, and between the moral groundings of society and the contingency of practice.

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For most ethnographers of contemporary Eurasia this is familiar and well-trodden ground for academic debate. Invoking moral relativism as a conscious methodological strategy, the majority have given theoretical precedence to the *ares* over the *oughts*. Rejecting normative definitions of favours (and ‘economies of favour’) as deviations from universal norms of governance, they have sought to construct culturally sensitive interpretations which capture the perspective of their subjects. As such, ethnographers have commonly re-embedded ostensibly ‘corrupt’ practices within the wider context of local practices of exchange and obligations of care, documenting how moralities of exchange have shifted together with changing post-socialist state and market configurations (Rivkin-Fish 2005; Sneath 2006; Stan 2012). Some have even claimed moral relativism on the part of their ethnographic subjects, suggesting that people operate with contextually and subjectively constructed moralities which allow them to navigate the complexities of post-socialist institutions and markets (Polese 2008; Wanner 2005). For others, the question remains to what extent the existence of collectively held social values place limitations on the behaviour and choices of individuals. Noting that informal transactions are often accompanied by expressions of friendship and mutual help, they read the willingness to bend social norms in certain situations and for certain people as part of a social ‘misrecognition game’ (Ledeneva 1998) designed to make the otherwise self-interested nature of exchange palatable to the participants. In short, while anthropologists have treated morality as primarily a problem of individual action and agency (rather than the transparent governance of markets, or public office), they have continued to pose their research questions in terms of compliance, deviance, and leniency.

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According to Michael Lambek (2010; also Keane 2010; Robbins 2007), this widely held preoccupation with questions of moral universality and ethical particularity has its roots in anthropology's adoption of a Kantian understanding of morality as an aspect of thought. Both Durkheimian concerns with social norms and the Boasian focus on discrete values, he observes, treat morality as a shared collection of social laws largely insulated from the contingencies of everyday practice. As a result, these intellectual traditions regard ethical conduct as grounded in the adherence to collective social and religious imperatives, or see it as a reflective choice brought on by the breakdown of such moral certainties (e.g. Zigon 2009). As Lambek eloquently argues, such approaches not only direct scholars towards 'questions of their universality or correctness', but risk 'literalizing ethical insight and rendering it static' (2010, 14). In place of Kant, he turns to Aristotle, proposing that moral judgement be seen as a 'fundamental property or function of action rather than (only) of abstract reason' (2010, 14). Ethical conduct, he suggests, is neither rare nor exceptional, but rather quite 'ordinary'; it is an inherent aspect of everyday actions and speech, and is expressed in our human propensity to pass judgement on ourselves and others (see Das 2012; Fassin 2011; Laidlaw 2014). As such, Lambek proposes that we understand the morals (and morality) of the collective and the deliberations of the individual as existentially indistinguishable; a product of action, as well as thought, moral judgements arise from people's engagement in the lives of others across a multiplicity (and multitude) of singular social exchanges and situations in everyday life (Das 2010).

Taking the individual act (rather than collective morality) as a starting point for our enquiries, we believe that this recent turn to the ethical presents a long-awaited opportunity to push beyond the tired universalist-relativist bind which characterizes the existing literature on Eurasian economies, favours, and 'economies of favour'. Indeed, if conventional anthropological reflections on the relationship between society, morality, and individual action have traditionally found their intellectual ancestors in the figures of Durkheim, Mauss, and Weber, this novel ethical perspective appears to be equally indebted to the work of liberal thinkers such as Adam Smith (see Humphrey, ch. 4; Laidlaw 2014). At the heart of Lambek's notion of 'ordinary ethics' lies what Smith (1759) called the 'moral sentiments' which underpin social relations. Noting that all members of society have an 'interest in the characters, designs, and actions of one another', Smith regarded successful (market) exchange as contingent not only on self-interest, but also the presence of fellow feeling and mutual esteem between social peers—that is, a degree of social 'sympathy' (Smith in Rothschild 2001, 9). In its modern usage, sympathy is often understood as providing the motivation for particularly ethical acts. Smith, however, employed the term to describe the 'process through

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which moral judgement was formed' and saw it as 'just as likely to lead to the approval of self-interested as openly benevolent actions' (Watson 2014, 3–4). In other words, he saw mutuality and sociability, as well as self-interest, as an inherent part of a universal competition for social recognition which lay at the core of all 'possible ethics, motives, and forms of exchange in modern society' (Liebersohn 2011, 39; also Gudeman 2008).

Smith's representation of social life as a moral economy of regard forms the lynchpin of Caroline Humphrey's seminal contribution to this volume (Chapter 3). Investigating the prevalence of illicit payments in higher education in Mongolia and Russia, Humphrey starts by dismantling several of the theoretical orthodoxies which continue to haunt the existing literature. Despite the nature of her ethnographic material, she eschews the conventional use of 'favours' as a euphemism for bribery and nepotism. Rather than reducing them to the status of ill-disguised transactions, Humphrey proposes instead that favours are a *sui generis* way of acting that deserve anthropological theorization on their own terms. In doing so, she questions the conventional understanding of 'economies of favour' as systems of redistributive exchange. Favours, she points out, gain their social efficacy and moral value precisely by virtue of not being conceptualized as exchanges (Humphrey, Chapter 3). They differ from other actions by their *ethics*, rather than their morphology. In other words, whether an act takes the form of barter, a gift, or even a commercial transaction, performing an action as a favour 'adds a "gratuitous" extra to any practical function it may have, and turns the act into something incalculable' (ibid., 000). Far from simply a reciprocal exchange of goods and services, then, favours are involved in the production of social esteem and personal reputations: a favour is a distinct '*moral* aesthetic of action that endows the actors with standing and a sense of self-worth' (ibid., 000). This explains why people often prefer to operate in the 'favour mode' even when doing things the official, above-board way may be perfectly feasible.

Humphrey's recourse to ethics should not be misunderstood as a romanticization of 'economies of favours' and their constituent relationships. Rather, sharing the spirit of Lambek's intervention, it serves to highlight the fact that the giving and receiving of favours is above all an ongoing, reflexive exercise in moral reasoning and action. Writing on the temporary housing market for Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow in this volume (Chapter 4), Madeleine Reeves explores precisely this entanglement of economic choices and the pursuit of social recognition. Painting a vivid picture of the life of the inhabitants of these communal apartments, she provides a particularly compelling illustration of the fact that 'informal' acts and practices carry existential values, rather than simply being calculative, instrumental, or gratuitous. Reeves uses the ethnography to test Humphrey's notion of favours and their limits in the context of the market. She shows how different rationalities of obligation and

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exchange are not just seen to be held between different categories of person, but are shaped by different social and geographical spaces; a gesture taken as a favour in Kyrgyzstan may require a market transaction in Moscow, and new obligations are put on migrants by their expectant kin waiting for remittances at home. The migrant experience thus consists of more than day-to-day efforts to 'get by' using the channels of the informal economy. Rather, it is characterized by an ongoing struggle to carve out spaces of cultural intimacy and moral accountability which allow them to fulfil their aspirations for a better life, as well as observe their filial duties towards family members in Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

Similar ethical-cum-existential tensions between social norms and individual actions, obligations, and self-interest also figure in Katherine Swancutt's chapter (Chapter 5) on the Nuosu 'anti-favour'. In this Tibeto-Burman minority community, writes Swancutt, villagers draw upon particular moral registers and aesthetic forms of action which are shaped by a history of conflict with the Han Chinese majority. Amongst the Nuosu, ethical conduct is thus shaped by a warrior aesthetic that celebrates not only the fulfilment of filial duty, but self-sacrifice for the sake of the lineage. And yet, an individual's decision to follow the obligations imposed by their relatives is not a mere deference to social norms, but an aesthetic and ethical act which can be experienced in visceral and corporeal terms. Such obligations can sometimes come to individuals in the guise of 'anti-favours', that is, as unexpected burdens which produce further obligation, but thereby also offer community members the opportunity to gain further esteem in the eyes of their lineage-mates—or at least 'save face' in situations of disgrace. Focusing on the moral aesthetics of Nuosu society, Swancutt's ethnography provides a rare and fruitful frontier perspective on the otherwise ubiquitous Chinese art of networking and gift exchange, *guanxi* (Yang 1994; Kipnis 1997), showing that there are limits to its reach even in the rapidly changing socio-economic environment of contemporary China. The Nuosu, she writes, are unable (or perhaps unwilling) to square the requirements of *guanxi* with their warrior aesthetics, regarding it not so much as a morally problematic practice, as simply inferior to their own ways of building and maintaining a personal reputation.

The contributions by Humphrey, Reeves, and Swancutt use the ethical perspective to illustrate how the very acts of giving, receiving, and even refusing favours are tied to existential and emotional (as well as material) gains and losses. And while Swancutt places special emphasis on the visceral quality of the moral aesthetic of Nuosu 'anti-favours', both she and Madeleine Reeves show how moral reasoning is phenomenologically and experientially grounded. What they describe is not merely 'ordinary ethics', but the 'ethics of the ordinary': the ethics of the 'rough ground of everyday life . . . understood in

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terms of the ways in which life is not only open to the pain, suffering, joy and ennui of others, but also to how the entanglements and relations of lives with other lives in the everyday, line of care and concern emerge, are fostered and also frayed' (Al-Mohammad and Peluso 2014, 44). As such, their contributions take us far beyond the conceptual parameters of political-economic approaches to 'economies of favour', and allow for the posing of an entirely new set of questions about the individuals who partake in these activities and their experience, including the role of religious beliefs, history and memory, and the universal human pursuit of dignity. Having located a place for favours across a broad spectrum of (post-socialist) societies and cultures, they present a formidable challenge to the conventional interpretation of such actions and practices as merely the unfortunate product of structurally inefficient or corrupt economies. The question remains, however, how we might build on their insights to productively re-imagine the place of favours within the wider context of global markets and models of governance. Returning to the academic literature on Eurasia, we make a small start to tackling this question in the next section.

Beyond Political Economies

One place to start this exercise might be to deconstruct and critically examine orthodox readings of 'economies of favour' as the geographically and historically unique products of the socialist command economy. Chris Hann takes up the challenge in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 6), arguing that our conceptual repertoire for thinking about post-socialist societies continues to be dominated by a distinct set of Cold War-era norms for political and economic action (also Fioramonti 2013, 23–49; Kwon 2010). Targeting the 'shortage paradigm' of János Kornai's (1988) widely accepted model of the socialist economy, he argues that its characterization of the socialist command economy as inflexible and over-centralized rested on a theoretically constructed opposition between the 'market' logic of mainstream capitalist societies and the 'redistributive' logic of the socialist system. Kornai's characterization of the socialist economy as one of 'shortage', in other words, was a product of his tendency to classify the realities of the socialist political economy according to the ideals of the capitalist political economy. Seeking to move beyond the biases of this liberal paradigm, Hann instead adopts a holistic perspective on economic organization under the rubric of the 'human economy' approach (Hart et al. 2010). Following Karl Polanyi, he characterizes market exchange and state-based redistribution not as mutually opposing economic principles, but rather as complementary 'forms of integration' together with householding (for example, subsistence production) and reciprocity (for

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example, gift exchange). Rather than being determined by issues of market supply and demand, Hann regards favours as belonging to the latter category, proposing that they act as a social lubricant across any number of state-market configurations.

Hann's critique highlights the degree to which notions of 'shortage' reflect a distinct set of norms for political and economic action inextricably linked to the imagined geopolitical space of the Cold War international order. This bias has been particularly evident in many scholars' struggles to productively conceptualize an afterlife for socialist-era 'economies of favour' in contemporary Eurasian societies. Indeed, as Gerald Creed (2011) has noted, Cold War observers viewed 'economies of favour' not simply as a type of economic practice developed under material duress, but also a type of civic action; assuming that socialist society suffered from a 'social vacuum', they interpreted personal networks as an alternative political arena which enabled ordinary citizens to compete for scarce resources. Expecting such practices to disappear together with their dysfunctional economic hosts after 1989, many were taken aback when opaque processes of privatization allowed the old *nomenklatura* to convert their political power and capital into economic advantage, creating an 'economy of kickbacks' which rewarded political insiders at the expense of the opposition (Eyal 2003). Unwilling to question the normative parameters of liberal reform, both political commentators and academics have tended to treat this reproduction of the (post-)socialist elites as a structural legacy of socialist institution-building, or as the result of an incomplete or defective 'transition' towards transparent markets and democratic governance (Åslund 2004; Jowitt 1993; Grabher and Stark 1997). Paradoxically, the very same observers who initially celebrated the doing of favours as a civic action, subsequently criticized the very same practices for preventing the healthy development of a liberal, democratic civil society by generating 'negative social capital' (ibid., 113).

Dismissing such normative approaches as naively teleological, anthropologists of post-socialist Eurasia have tended to eschew the 'transition' discourses, emphasizing the need to assess the institutional legacies and cultural heritage of socialism (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann 2002). Few, however, have given much thought to how notions of temporality and history-making may influence perceptions of this legacy. Investigating the formation and consolidation of post-socialist elite networks in rural Bulgaria, Deema Kaneff's contribution to this volume (Chapter 7) does just that. Documenting how former Communist functionaries redistributed communal resources and leadership positions amongst themselves, Kaneff notes that rather than using these prizes for their personal gain, they insisted they be put to work for the good of the village. This fidelity to socialist values on the part of political elites, she explains, was rooted in the particularities of local history: having sheltered

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the nation's socialist leader Todor Zhivkov from the fascist government in the 1930s, village officials subsequently enjoyed particularly intimate relations with the Communist Party leadership, as well as privileged access to state resources. After 1989 they continued to cultivate ties with its post-socialist successor, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, hoping once again to attract funding to increasingly impoverished community. Critiquing the notion of 'path dependence', Kaneff thus shows that history is more than a passive determinant of things. Elite networks did not simply grow out of specific pasts and evolve along a set path, but were the product of a constant (re)construction and rewriting of history on a local level. As such, history provided a moral framework which regulated elite activities, ensuring that they were put to the service of the community as a whole.

Kaneff's chapter offers a very different reading of the relationship between political patronage, state power, and post-socialist reform, convincingly illustrating that elite networks are not invariably predatory constructions, but may mediate relations between needy communities and an increasingly austere neoliberal state. And yet, without denying the very real hardships experienced by her interlocutors, she resists the urge to label their actions as simply the 'survival strategy' of a desperate rural population (Bridger and Pine 1998; Day, Papataxiarchis, Stewart 1999). In so doing, Kaneff avoids both recasting neoliberalism as the new 'shortage paradigm' and repeating the unfortunate ethnographic tradition of portraying post-socialist populations as little more than the victims of the hardships of the post-1989 economic restructuring. Indeed, in focusing on local efforts to restore connections with the political centre, she (and other contributors to this volume) echoes Joel Robbins' recent call for anthropologists to explore the ways in which people living in different societies 'strive to create the good in their lives' (2013, 475). Together with fellow anthropologist James Laidlaw, Robbins justifies this need for a redirection of the ethnographic gaze by pointing to the recent rise of a new 'anthropology of suffering' which 'specializes in the minute description of . . . circumstantial miseries' (Laidlaw 2014, 31). This genre of ethnographic writing—the 'suffering slot'—he argues, replaces cultural alterity with misery; instead of describing cultural difference, the emphasis is placed on the subject 'living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence and oppression' (2014, 448). In the place of the culturally exotic or socially different 'Other', it thus places the figure of the 'suffering subject' who is defined less by their subjectivity, history, or humanity, than by the particular nature of their deprivation.

Several chapters in this volume move beyond this trope of the socialist/post-socialist 'surviving' or 'suffering' subject in order to appreciate the importance of other dimensions of the human condition. Chapter 8 by Tomasz Rakowski illustrates how post-socialist economies of favour are involved in the creation

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of imagined social consensus in times of hardship or conflict. In this case, the social consensus is imagined in both the sociological and literal sense; Rakowski explores how ethics and aesthetics intersect in the performance of unregulated labour and exchange, and how these are reflected in bodily experience and material practice. Focusing on the bootleg (illegal) mining and scavenging for scrap metal undertaken by unemployed miners in the Polish district of Wałbrzych, he illustrates how such practices of ‘hunting and gathering’ requires ex-miners to employ their professional skills to strip, sell, and recycle an environment of industrial decay. It also depends largely on the willingness of the local authorities to turn a blind eye. Previously celebrated as the vanguard of the socialist working class, these miners now struggle not only with economic marginalization, but with a need to reconcile their own interpretation of their present practice as honest labour with its illegality. As such, they are forced to explain their actions to themselves, commenting upon and justifying their own balancing of law and lawlessness, most often through narratives of exceptional luck or cunning, or the mocking of legal and religious authorities. Carnavalesque and playful, Rakowski argues that these jokes and stories form a kind of ‘interior spectacle’ which grasp at an imaginary threshold where laws and measurements, hierarchies and statuses collapse, and they themselves rise above the constraints of their situation.

Rakowski’s ethnography illustrates how informal (and illegal) economic activities, petty bribery, and the establishing of connections to persons of authority constitute more than simply ‘survival strategies’. His focus on the existential dimension of economic reproduction is shared by David Henig, who traces the moral dilemmas and ethical decisions of Muslim villagers in Central Bosnia (Chapter 9). Living in economically precarious conditions after the breakdown of the socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the subsequent civil war of the 1990s, villagers find that gaining an education and mediating access to jobs often requires providing kickbacks of various kinds. Yet, rather than simply documenting the villagers’ ways of ‘getting by’ using personal connections (known in Bosnia-Herzegovina as *štela* and *veze*), Henig asks what this ‘economy of favours’ would look like if we attended to it from the perspective of their vernacular moral cosmology and everyday ethics. Unpacking the moral complexity of villagers’ decision-making and judgments, he shows that when Muslims are involved in such exchanges, they often question not only whether doing or receiving a favour is illegal, but whether it may be sinful or not. While the public sphere is saturated by government officials and foreign development agencies trumpeting international, normative discourses of corruption, Henig shows how villagers make sense of their actions (and those of their neighbours) according to religious and moral idioms of doing ‘good deeds’ that earn merits for the afterlife. In this way, villagers find an efficacious way to negotiate relations

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of patronage, informality, and even illegality without losing their sense of self-worth and accountability vis-à-vis fellow villagers, and—equally importantly—the Almighty. Engaging ethnographically with their day-to-day striving to live the ‘good’ life (morally and materially understood), Henig provides a vivid illustration of what moral dilemmas and ethical decisions such pursuits entail.

Towards a Semiotics of Favours

The chapters by Rakowski and Henig bring us to our final set of concerns and themes shared across the different chapters, namely issues of method and methodology. Recent scholarship on post-socialist ‘economies of favour’ have eschewed large-scale surveys and questionnaires in favour of more qualitatively oriented approaches. Employing interviews and participant observation to uncover the socially and morally embedded nature of such transactions, they have introduced the value of ethnographic methods to the field (Morris and Polese 2013; Williams, Round, and Rodgers 2013). Yet, as Alena Ledeneva notes in her contribution to this volume (Chapter 2), studying something as fluid, situational, and ‘polythetic’ as favours requires more than engaging in ethnography as ‘qualitative method’. It requires a researcher to observe and discuss potentially sensitive subjects and situations in an oblique way, and to be attuned to a wider semiotics of ‘open secrets’ and ‘knowing smiles’ through which favours are enacted and communicated. This ‘language of favours’ is locally specific, and partaking in it requires a certain degree of social competence on the part of the ethnographers (as well as his or her interlocutors). Furthermore, studying this phenomenon entails engagement in situations which require a compassionate action and affective sentiment, which is meaningful and yet often comes without explicit or elaborated articulation; fellow participants in ‘economies of favour’, Ledeneva tells us, simply ‘know’ and ‘feel’ together. Thus, rather than seeing ethnography as simply one of a methodological choice over many others, the contributors to this volume regard it to be a vital part of a long-term grassroots study of human conditions, practices, and local universes of value. They aim not simply to provide an accurate reflection of the everyday practice, but to uncover what Maurice Bloch (1998) has unforgettably described as the ‘what goes without saying’ approach to social interaction and community life.

The argument for an ethnographically sensitive approach to ‘favours’ may appear obvious to some readers, but we believe it deserves our attention and a more serious discussion for at least two reasons. The first is the question of how we might translate concepts such as the favour (or, indeed, obligation, bribery, or corruption) across diverse cultural contexts and into our own

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analytical language. While recent scholarship has worked hard to explain the vigorous continuity of informal economic practices after the collapse of Communist rule across Eurasia, there have been relatively few attempts to radically rethink the analytical tools which were developed for studying these phenomena during the Cold War era. Just as scholars have struggled to find a way out of the theoretical (and ideological) binds of the universalist–relativist continuum, they have been rather reluctant to detach themselves from the canon of political-economic approaches which attempt to concretize and locate informal practices within the market and/or the state bureaucracy (e.g. Hart 1973; Castells, Portes, and Benson 1989). Accepting the dual-economy model as a point of departure (rather than as a subject for critical analysis), anthropologists, economists, geographers, and sociologists alike have tended to divide exchange into the categories of the ‘formal’ and the ‘informal’. This exercise in classification has often led to a simplification of the ad hoc, serendipitous nature of the relations and exchanges in which favours tend to figure. Indeed, as Keith Hart, who coined the term ‘informal economy’, himself has remarked, while these terms might explain ‘what people are not doing’, they do not adequately describe what people actually do or ‘point to any active principles they may have for doing it’ (2005, 10). The concept of ‘informality’, he suggests, tells us more about the imagined orthodoxies of academics and policy-makers, than about the nature of these practices themselves.

The prevalence of a systemic approach has also meant that very little attention has been paid to the possibility of using vernacular languages and other modes of expression as a valuable resource for the development of new analytical terminology. Indeed, although many authors add colour to their ethnographic descriptions by employing vernacular expressions in their work, few have explored the potential of such vocabularies to open up novel theoretical and thematic directions in research. Rather, scholars have tended to qualify and interpret local euphemism by reference to the Soviet-era concept of *blat*, popularized through Ledeneva’s seminal work. Without questioning the transferability of the concept to other practices and socio-historical contexts, scholars often animated the ethnographic material through its approximation as more or less ‘*blat-like*’ (for the limitations of such approach see Ledeneva 2008). As such, the term has become reified as the catch-all archetype of any number of socialist and post-socialist economic practices beyond the remit of the state, leading to an indiscriminate application of the term ‘economies of favour’ to a wide range of practices of production and trade, as well as corruption, clientelism, and patronage. Like the easy recourse to predefined notions of economic ‘informality’, this uncritical adoption of the *blat* paradigm overlooks both the qualitative differences between such activities, as well as the richness of vernacular concepts. Indeed, apart from

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reducing the very complexity of local ‘languages of favours’ into ‘*blat*-like’ typologies, this practice of approximating vernacular idioms of doing favours with typified categories has effectively made favours analytically indistinguishable from bribery and corruption, and has thus rendered the term conceptually unproductive.

In this volume, we aim to build a reflexive and sensitive analytical framework out of vernacular communicative idioms and languages, rather than subsuming them into pre-existing analytical categories and terminologies. All our contributors attend to the study of favours through a careful examination of local ‘languages of favours’—that is, the language of contextually specific forms of ‘open secrets’ or ‘knowing smiles’. They trace the vernacular idioms, concepts, and gestures, along with linguistic, graphic, or material ideologies that underpin the economic imagination and moral registers in given contexts. Specifically, they ethnographically substantiate vernacular idioms of the acts of doing favours such as *blat*, *guanxi*, *jardam*, *salt*, *sevap*, *štela*, and *znajomości*, and further explore the interplay of these vernaculars with other forms of embodied expression in human situations. These include gestures and joking expressions (for example, a coal sack filled with snow to deceive the police), particular forms of gift-giving (for example, the gift of a bottle of homemade *pálinka*, rather than a bottle of cognac), or kinship idioms (for example, the Mongolian conceptions of ‘dry’ and ‘wet’ relatives). Indeed, by situating vernacular idioms into a wider communicative context of embodied expressions, the contributors illustrate how an ethnographic approach to the study of favours enables us to appreciate the particularity of different traditions that shape the ways in which people act and make valuations and judgements. Holding people to their modes of expression, we argue, has the potential to illuminate aspects of the contemporary socio-economic and political life in which these practices (and academic debates) take place (for a similar argument in the study of bankers and derivative traders see Miyazaki 2013).

One chapter which exploits this particular approach is Nicolette Makovicky’s ethnography of Polish artisans and commercial traders in the contemporary cottage industry making ‘folky’ crochet lace in the Carpathian village of Koniaków (Chapter 10). Exploring local vocabularies of favour and favouritism, Makovicky suggests that the difference between gestures and their social significance might best be approached as idiomatic, rather than as systemic or typological: the meaning of an act emerges from the entanglement of words and deeds in everyday life. Run predominantly on the unregistered labour of kin and community members, the cottage industry can be described as ‘informal’ in the classic sense, that is, it operates beyond the spaces and rules of the regulated market. Artisans and traders collude to circumvent the letter of the law in order to earn their share of the small profit

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margins in the craft industry, often deploying gifts and granting favours in order to direct employment and trade their way. In this way, gratuitous action becomes articulated not only with commercial transactions, but also with petty economic crime in the form of tax avoidance and benefit fraud. Such informalization accommodates small-time enterprise by extending market practice into community and kin relations. However, it also creates internal competition for employment, labour, and profit. As artisans and entrepreneurs stake out their positions in the political economy of the industry, in other words, several conflicting registers of contract and affect are set into play and the social meaning of gratuitous gestures become a point of contention. Makovicky focuses particularly on moments when the usual ‘reciprocity of sentiment’ between villagers breaks down and conflicts ensue, exploring how both lace makers and traders exploit ambiguities of language and gesture to their advantage.

Both Ledeneva and Makovicky highlight the fact that favours make for slippery targets for social research, being inherently ethnographically and conceptually ambivalent. This ambivalence, Alena Ledeneva argues in her chapter, stems from the fact that the ‘favour’ arises from doing something which deviates from the ‘normal’ rules of obligation and reciprocity, while also sustaining the norms—making an exception that proves the rule. The meaning, value, and effect of an action in such situations remain open to interpretation by both giver and receiver. At the same time, the favour eludes easy theoretical categorization as it shares both features of the gift, of gratuity, and obligation, as well as self-serving exchange, calculative transaction, and investment. Building on Ledeneva’s point, Madeleine Reeves notes that while favours may quite easily be rendered analytically distinct through their separation from instrumental or calculative exchange, *ethnographically* the distinction is far less clear (Chapter 4). Thus, while Caroline Humphrey opens this volume by emphasizing the ethical singularities of the favour, Reeves points out that whether or not a gesture is intended as ‘a favour’, or perceived to be so, the morphology of the act itself remains socially significant. This provokes several questions. Firstly, what is the significance of the mode through which a favour is performed? What impels actors to choose certain modes of action as vehicles for their goodwill, and who benefits from these performances? Secondly, how does this choice of vehicle link concepts of gratuitous action with a particular social register and the objects with which it is associated? How, in short, is the favour related to local categories of action such as barter, commodity exchange, and, in particular, the gift?

Together, the contributions by Makovicky, Ledeneva, and Reeves illustrate that a favour will always be ambiguous and open to (re-)interpretation—in particular when it is (as it often is) delivered in the guise of some other action. What all the chapters in this volume demonstrate in one way or another is

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how their polythetic character leaves acts of favour immanent to any action and situation, and brings favours, along with barter, exchange, debt, and reciprocity, onto the list of economic universals to be found across all economies and cultures. And it is precisely this productive ambiguity which points to the greater value of their ethnographic elucidation—an elucidation that this volume offers. Indeed, working from our attempt to build theoretically on ethnographic insights, the chapters that follow pave new ways for re-imagining the place of favours in contemporary society, exploring how they operate at multiple scales within the wider context of the economic order and models of governance, and how they penetrate human lives—be it in the post-socialist Eurasia, among British politicians and their social mobility tsars, or elsewhere.

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