

|Book Symposium|



Transference and counter- transference in *Life in debt*

Comment on HAN, Clara. 2012. *Life in debt: Times of care and violence in neoliberal Chile*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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What I found immediately compelling about this book was Clara Han's personal courage and ethnographic skill at entering so deeply and empathetically into the lives of the people of La Pincoya. Reading her dramatic descriptions of peoples' everyday crises, struggles, and aspirations, and seeing the oppressive and pervasive ramifications of indebtedness in their lives, I found myself asking two questions. First, what is it that moves an anthropologist to commit herself so completely to the subjects of her research, especially when this means placing her own life in jeopardy, unless she feels that she has accrued a moral debt to her subjects that she can only begin to repay by giving them her undivided attention and trust—so that ethnographic praxis becomes an act of care and of solidarity? Second, is there a way in which anthropologists can approach indebtedness as a phenomenon that is *anterior* to the specific historical and politico-economic conditions under which the vexed questions of moral obligation, debt, and social justice make their appearance? Clearly, the first question could only be answered by the ethnographer herself, though it would seem to be not unconnected to our human impulse to bear witness to suffering, even when we cannot alleviate it, and to identify with those who suffer as a magical strategy for annulling our sense of impotence in the face of their afflictions. The second question touches on the symbolic logic of reciprocity in social relations and, as Han's research demonstrates, a complicated interplay exists between interpersonal relations, relations between citizens and the state, and relations between people and their gods. In all these sectors, questions of fairness and justice are at stake—what the state owes its citizens, what the affluent owe the poor, what a family or community owes its members, and what the gods owe humanity. But how can we avoid reducing the notion of debt to its purely material manifestations, and do justice to its spiritual, moral, and symbolic nuances?

In *Debt: The first 5,000 years* (2011), David Graeber points out that despite radically different cultural, political, or economic circumstances, human beings appear to be “haunted” by a “mythic communism” that finds expression in the principle “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” “If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life,” Graeber argues, “we must start . . . with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all” (2011: 89). This, Han succeeds in doing admirably. But theoretically, her emphasis is on explaining moral indebtedness against the historical background of Chile’s years of state-imposed neoliberal policies, leaving aside the more general questions concerning the ontological dimensions of exchange, sacrifice, and natural justice that Graeber, in the tradition of Marx and Mauss, broaches. Was the resurgence of democracy after the fall of Pinochet, and the new rhetoric of the state owing its citizens a moral debt, not only a reminder of the oscillation between hierarchy and egalitarianism that characterizes the history of so many modern states, but a sign of the dialectic between differentiation and identification, enmity and amity, that informs all social relations regardless of whether the individuals or groups involved are powerful or powerless, poor or affluent, articulate or voiceless? What is at issue here is how *completely* we can explain human situations and experiences by referring to state policies and programs, traumatic historical events, global political economies, and discursive regimes. This is a largely unresolved issue in *Life in debt*, for though Han writes within the paradigm of political economy, the superbly detailed and in-depth quality of her ethnography undercuts this theoretical perspective. It is not simply a matter of seeing how “State institutions and economic precariousness are folded into people’s intimate relations, commitments and aspirations” (Han 2012: 17); it is a question of showing in what ways these prior factors are at once objective *and* subjective, actual *and* imagined, mediating worldviews without ever being entirely reducible to them.

This indeterminate relationship between constitutive forces and constituting agents is particularly evident in the case of care, which is at once a product of healthcare institutions, personal dispositions, and individual emotions (including those of the ethnographer herself, “drawn into a range of relationships” with her subjects). Clearly, the origins of dispositions and emotions are not necessarily traceable to market forces, medical technologies, and material resources. Thus, in the aftermath of Sra. Flora’s son-in-law’s violent assault on her daughter, Sra. Flora asked the couple to leave her house. She had been pushed beyond the limit of what she could endure. “Sra. Flora’s narrative was not one of abandonment or social death,” Han writes, “Rather, by telling Florcita to leave the home, Sra. Flora reaffirmed her life within it” (48). She repaired the house, built a small garden, “walked with more energy in her step . . . projected her voice instead of guarding it closely in hushed whispers” and “marked out the home as nonviolent” despite the violences that surrounded her (47–48). Han’s nuanced, sensitive, intimate writing captures the everyday negotiations and transformations that define life at the limit, but it is not simply the limit, but *life* to which her ethnography attests—the “different ways,” as she puts it, “of being oriented to and living in time” (233). “In staying with, or being immersed in, a ‘drop of time,’ anthropological inquiry can

attend to those kind acts—those presents of this world—a responsiveness to the lives of others that can neither be named nor instrumentalized as social policy in the service of actual justice” (90). This approach also reminds us that suffering is endured and imagined differently by different people *despite its origins being identical for all*, and that the traumas visited upon people by the violence of their history or the inequalities in their societies generate self-perpetuating patterns of behavior that remain in place long after the precipitating cause has passed. Because dysfunctional coping strategies within families may constitute a kind of practico-inert—possessing a life and logic of their own—what kinds of agency or praxis can transform the situation, and where do state interventions and personal responsibilities merge in this transformative process?

I am not sure how either of the questions I raised at the beginning of this review may be resolved. Our closeness and identification with our interlocutors makes it almost impossible to analyze the sources and repercussions of this involvement—which, in psychoanalytic terms, includes both transference and counter-transference. And the current anthropological vogue for explaining individual experience and interpersonal interactions by referring to state or global forces all too often occludes or marginalizes the mutable and various ways in which agency, mood, emotion, memory, and personality figure in the evolutionary struggles of everyday life. Reading *Life in debt* between the lines, I find an unresolved tension between these different perspectives—the experience-near and the experience-distant, the argot of the street and the jargon of the academy, the humanistic and the scientific traditions. But then, aren't such irreconcilable points of view reminiscent of the contrasted perspectives with which the people of La Pincoya understand their lifeworld, shaped by history and circumstance yet also seizing the day and finding tortuous passages through the vexations and violences that beset them?

References

- Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The first 5,000 years*. New York: Melville House.
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