Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 1
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Published by University College London

LEDENEVA, ALENA.
Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 1: Towards Understanding of Social and Cultural Complexity.

University College London, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81978.

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Part I

Redistribution

The substantive ambivalence: relationships vs use of relationships

Preface

Alena Ledeneva

Part I maps the blurred boundaries between sociable and instrumental in relationships – the ‘instrumentality of sociability’ in Chapter 1 and the ‘sociability of instrumentality’ in Chapter 2. In exploring whether it is possible to separate a relationship from the use of that relationship, these two chapters highlight the ambivalent nature of relationships – seen by participants as social, but by observers as instrumental, but indeed neither, or both. The substantive ambivalence of informal exchanges – where one cannot agree or disagree with either participants or observers – means that any single categorisation of the way in which gifts, favours, transfers and transactions are given, taken or exchanged would be reductionist.

The entries are organised in descending order from those seen by readers in a pilot study as being more social informal exchanges to those perceived as more instrumental. The entries focus on open secrets in societies related to the redistribution of resources. From economies of favours to the exchange of gifts and informal payments, the ‘elephant in the room’ here is the banality of informality, invisible because it is, on the one hand, everyday, routine, taken for granted, common and small, and yet, on the other hand, omnipresent and therefore voluminous and influential outside its narrower context. The social contexts of gifts, favours and payments that defy clear borders between materiality and non-materiality, between pure gift and reciprocity, make such social exchanges particularly elusive and hard to pin down.

Chapter 1, ‘Neither gift nor commodity: The instrumentality of sociability’, explores the myths about informal exchanges of favours. First, they are often seen as instrumental exchanges, while their social side is underestimated. Sociability and instrumentality are two sides of one
coin, quite literally the ambivalent currency serving the ‘economies of favours’ embedded in human emotions, while also fulfilling the important function of redistributing resources. Second, as Nicolette Makovicky and David Henig emphasise in their introduction, economies of favours play an essential role in times of societal change such as post-communist transitions. Makovicky and Henig stress the intrinsic link between economies of favours and the socialist idea with its emphasis on comradery, fraternity, collectivity and, under late socialism, opposition to the state. Third, Sheila Puffer and Daniel McCarthy dissect the assumption that economies of favours are grounded exclusively in shortages and red tape, making them operational mainly in transitional societies. Puffer and McCarthy argue rather for the instrumentality of favours in all societies, including those with individualistic values, competitive markets and strong institutions. The question of how the substantive ambivalence of favours unfolds in different political and socio-economic contexts leads us to contemplate what is post-socialist and what is global in economies of favours, and to reflect more generally on the context-bound nature of informal exchanges: regimes of equivalence, regimes of affection and regimes of status (Ledeneva 1998: 144–55).

Chapter 2, ‘Neither gift nor payment: The sociability of instrumentality’, focuses on practices perceived as more instrumental, less voluntary and more reciprocal than exchanges of favours. Again, instrumental payments tend also to be social. Euphemisms for instrumental exchanges, or the multitude of the ‘language games’ used in such exchanges, are of particular interest since they not only serve the purpose of polite conversation but also highlight the necessity to ‘socialise’ and ‘normalise’ instrumentality. Vernaculars of informality, as Makovicky and Henig argue, are essential for deception and self-deception, for adhering to the norms while playing them to one’s own advantage, and for talking about morally reprehensible exchanges in terms of morally acceptable patterns of sharing, tipping, or even charity. The fundamental principles of giving, and the issues around its interested or disinterested nature, are theorised by Florence Weber in her conclusion to Chapter 2. Weber highlights the importance of timing, obligation of the recipient, domination of the donor, logic of antagonism or alliance, personalisation or anonymity, as well as the interconnectedness of public and private contexts in navigating the complexity of social exchanges.

The substantive ambivalence of currencies serving such social exchanges and residing in grey zones – neither gift nor commodity, neither gift nor payment, neither material nor non-material, neither public nor private, neither payment nor a bribe – is the common theme of Part I,
as illustrated by the tensions between sociability and instrumentality revealed in different contexts. Bringing the blurring of the boundaries between sociability and instrumentality into focus sheds new light on how the ambivalence of informal exchange constructs and enables redistribution processes in complex societies.