Subjective Lives and Economic Transformations in Mongolia

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Conclusion

As an anthropologist, I came to economic anthropology somewhat illegitimately, through research on prophecy (Empson 2006), kinship and ownership regimes (Empson 2011; 2012). Performative economic theory gave me a way in to explore forms of financialisation that were impacting on the lives of people in my long-term field site (Empson 2014). This led to broader interests in issues of temporary possession (Empson and Bonilla 2019). During the course of my research for this book my theoretical interest was again pushed to look beyond ideas of performativity to feminist scholars who were calling into question the very idea of what counts as the economic, by extending these concepts to examine broader issues of care, hope, debt and freedom. They called attention to the way in which the economy is made at the margins of what we may think of as its reach.

This broadening of focus has been liberating in that it has opened up what counts as a ‘proper subject’ in the study of economic anthropology. It has shifted the focus from pure representation (a sort of thick description) and relativism (a deep substantivist approach: ‘the economy can be anything’) to look at the way diversity actually underpins the foundations of what we think of as capitalism.

This commitment to highlighting diversity within is, in itself, a practice of prefiguration, both for anthropologists and for their subjects, bringing the political into anthropological writing, so that choosing what to highlight and describe works to amplify and make that world come into being. Terms like ‘capitalism’ and ‘the economy’ carry theoretical baggage, which I have tried to break apart through ethnographic insight that brings new subjects to bear on these themes. Foremost of these is the concept of the gap, a term that was used ethnographically but which I have found useful when mobilised across the chapters to think conceptually about the different issues that arise for each of the women. Not unlike the idea of ‘the void’, the gap is as much a space as a temporal concept that allows an exchange of perspectives, a looking back and revising...
past ideas in light of the present; a revision based on how things have turned out. Rather than (re)creating accounts of homogeneous neoliberal conditions, I have chosen to focus on the way in which this perspective opens us up to a diversity of lives.

We have seen how this diversity is realised through each of the chapters: as Oyunaa revised her past ideas about how to carry out a business in the present; as Sara reviewed her political ideas through an awareness of the need for radical change; through the way Tuyaa prefigures the future in her ethical calculus; in the way Zedlen, caught in socialist morals, is nevertheless able to exercise a freedom in her present work; and, finally, with Delgermaa, who resorts to networks of support when models from elsewhere fail to materialise the worlds they imagine. The world in which they act, which gives them, or limits, their agency, allows them to prefigure a trajectory over which they have some command. In these spaces the binaries on which the gap depends dissolve in the very act of reflecting back. Recognising that ‘this space’ has come to resemble something completely different, we generate a new third perspective or space. This final section is my own attempt at exactly that process.

The kind of world we have been looking at is one where people have questioned the legitimacy of the people who are leading their country. It is one where people resort to exchange in groups, and among networks or factions, when economic scarcity has brought a halt to the flow of things. Where democracy is seen as a system that facilitates corruption and greed, but people still strive for change, although they recognise that the path is not linear. Where trade with foreign investors, increasing reliance on sovereign debt, and the influence of the internet and the media have had an impact on the range of cosmological thought, allowing people to draw on practices and ideas from elsewhere to rethink things, including ideas about the nation. Alongside this looking outwards there is also a drawing inwards, not least because the geological and environmental landscape of Mongolia as it is exposed to new forms of extraction increasingly ‘acts back’ on those who live there, to expose polluted rivers, overgrazed pastureland, insurmountable waste and collapsing underground tunnels. A kind of geological and environmental retaliation intervenes in the progressive expansion of capitalism everywhere, but it is perhaps felt acutely in a country like Mongolia, where people live embedded in their environment in ways we may not quite do in the West (see Lee et al. 2019).

It is possible that what counts as a ‘strategic resource’ will shift away from the familiar mines and mineral reserves enshrined in laws as people
around the world look to other ways to produce energy; that the pursuit of economic growth through extraction will not be the only model worth chasing. What will Mongolia’s resources be then, and who will have access to them, and on what terms? A major cultural resource that has allowed people to manage the temporary and shifting, so prevalent over the past few years, is recourse to the master/custodian relationship (Empson 2014), which is not one of coloniser/colonised, but a form of access to resources based on nested hierarchies of usufruct, allowing people to navigate complex ownership relations, including ones based on debt and loans (see Chapters 4 and 5). By attending to the way in which such ideas are revised and reset, to the gap as a productive space of creativity and openness, we have been able to see how ideas about access and ownership may be mobilised as resources to rethink things for the future.

What does recognition of this say about the nature of global capitalism more generally? Throughout the wider project on which this book was based, I was often called upon to reflect on my findings to the Mongolian government, its banks and its business investors, as well as other governments. Sometimes I highlighted that what people were experiencing in Mongolia provided a kind of blueprint for what was beginning to happen elsewhere as economic policies in one place reverberated across borders, between East and West. At other times I emphasised that life for people in Mongolia has been shaped in very particular ways. This difference tells us something about how different forms of financialisation are received and shaped, and how developing economies are forced to accept certain structural policies but cannot always act on them in the same way as more developed countries, because the structures of power and finance that might buttress them do not exist. It is important to note the kinds of critique that emerge in such spaces and to document the ‘non-scalable economic diversity’ they engender. Not just to demonstrate ethnographic diversity but also to uncover the structural reasons why policies based on developmental economics do not translate in the way that may have been intended. It is to politically ‘talk back’ to those policies with the voices and experiences of the subjects who have had to live them.

In some ways the strategies my subjects have mobilised in ‘the gap’ will be familiar to anthropologists of Mongolia. They include, but are not confined to, reliance on networks, the economy of favours, drawing on the ‘deep past’ for religious, spiritual and nationalist ideas in times of uncertainty, expressions of ethical care and self-cultivation, and the sharing of ownership, assets and debt. I hope that these strategies, and others I’ve discussed, can also ‘talk back’ and be mobilised as critiques by anthropologists in their descriptions (and in answer to questions about their findings),
so that a transfer of ideas occurs across perspectives. Documenting all this in writing is therefore a political act that broadcasts how people engage with economic volatility as a major characteristic of life, and not necessarily as a deviant or passing phase. The strategies mobilised by one’s interlocutors can become a form of critique outside the sphere in which it is generated, speaking to different outcomes and audiences and working back on our own ideas of what are considered acceptable means of accumulating, owning and transacting (cf. Miyazaki 2006).

Finally – and I may not have been able to show the extent of this in this book – I want to stress that what we see materialising in the gap, in the space between an economic and a political vision and its slow unfurling into something else, is particular to Mongolia, but it also starkly holds up a mirror up to what is also materialising elsewhere. It may seem to some that I have been documenting the experiences of people exploited on the peripheries of world power, but their experiences demonstrate inequalities that are occurring in many places. With the flow of resources like coal and copper to China we can see the traces of larger migratory flows of global commodities, mineral wealth, political forms and social imaginaries. The goods we have come to rely on in the West carry more than their simple parts. They bind and implicate us in a chain of relations that stem back to the worlds I have been describing. In a parallel to the way in which Mongolian minerals continue to fuel China’s steel industry, which satisfies the consumption of goods in the West, Mongolia’s current economic experience and the subjects that emerge therewith should provide a basis for reflecting on our own need for change. Far from being something only undergone by those on the periphery, what is happening in Mongolia may, in fact, prefigure a future that we have yet to fully realise. Here we can begin to perceive final a reciprocity of perspectives. The West as a figure or exemplar of how politics and the economy ‘should’ run has finally become the ground as emerging Eastern economic subjects and their critiques begin to prefigure what we may come to experience in the West. That I learnt this from the five women who feature in this book makes me feel both extremely grateful and humbled.

It is with this insight that I want to end by saying that the gap that continues to hold our lives partially connected across different places reciprocates in multiple ways, allowing each of us to see a different world from that in which we are located and to prefigure our own futures in its image.