

Gujar describe the bounty of the natural environment while emphasizing the rigid constraints that Sawar people confronted in utilizing the natural resources that surrounded them. Just as the authors elaborate the realities of princely power, they also emphasize the powers of collaborative resistance and collective persistence that enabled Sawar residents to lead socially rich and physically robust lives. In contrast with these memories, Gold and Gujar present the realities of postindependence Sawar, in which moral decay, laziness, and conceit are perceived by contemporary villagers as manifestations of institutional and individual irresponsibility. Ironically, today's political and social freedoms are apparent both in the visibly degraded natural surroundings and in the depravity of social values that place individualistic acquisitiveness over communal generosity.

Where the voices of Sawar residents are integrated with insightful analysis, both the ethnographic materials and the theoretical analyses are riveting. In the chapter entitled "Shoes," the authors examine the deeply internalized collective memory of punishment by the shoe. Offering a nuanced analysis of the symbolic importance of shoes in demarcating social strata, the authors suggest that prohibition from wearing shoes, as well as punishment by "the shoe"—an oversized and semi-mythologized shoe whose sole purpose was punishment—were inextricably linked with representations of domination and dispossession. Moreover, shoes are important mediating elements in people's relationship with nature: Without shoes, feet become blistered, impaled, and cold. Through their discussion of shoes, the authors convincingly argue that both the social values inherent in wearing shoes and the interface between people and nature as represented by shoes were controlled and manipulated through the powers of the feudal state during the "time of the kings." In the concluding chapter, Gold and Gujar offer a fascinating discussion of the parallel decline of natural ecology and moral economy of Sawar, and again shoes become an important symbol of change. Although in contemporary Sawar no one is prohibited from wearing shoes, the Japanese sandals

and rubber thongs commonly worn by ordinary people do not offer adequate protection from nature's harsh elements, including the thorns of the recently introduced mesquite tree and the hot sands of the deforested landscape.

Although the ethnographic emphasis on people's memories is the book's greatest strength, it also poses a significant weakness. Some of the collected stories evoke a powerful sense of people's experiences; however, the authors' tendency to pull multiple stories together as beads on a string, with relatively little to connect them meaningfully beyond general, topical commonalities, leaves the analysis in some sections of the book unsatisfying.

Overall, the detailed stories and incisive analyses offered in this book provide rich evidence of the strengths of ethnographic research. Gold's long-term partnerships with field assistants—and her exceptionally close collaboration with Gujar in research and writing—exemplify participant-observation at its best, in which participation involves not only the ethnographer's active involvement in a particular community but also the integration of local partners in the research process. The reader catches glimpses of the many levels at which the authors discussed their research. Gold and Gujar include sighs, nonverbal noises, and side comments in their text as relevant forms of expression. The contexts, cadences, and contours of the interviews and conversations offer both illustrative information regarding memories and evidence of a truly shared, ethnographic partnership between Gold and Gujar, and with other residents of Sawar.

Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams. *David Graeber.* New York: Palgrave, 2001. vii + 337 pp., notes, references, index.

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Why write an anthropological theory of value? Or rather, why a theory of "value," as opposed to a theory of desire, power, magic, creativity, or political action—all of which put in an appearance in this expansive and inspired

series of meditations. Each of the seven chapters in Graeber's book could almost stand alone, which points to his selection of "value" as the theme for the book: This is, despite Graeber's endeavors to rein in his voracious investigations, an anthropological theory of Everything That Matters.

What matters here is the degree to which human beings perceive themselves as possessing the capacity to act on the physical and social world—to apprehend what is valuable. So this is no orthodox work of economic anthropology but, rather, an attempt to find a consistent analytic for as many connotations of value as possible. Graeber takes as his starting point the proposition that globalization and its academic rendering, postmodernism, appear to assert that the only capacity for creativity we have lies in our consumption practices. He then argues to the contrary that, alongside the dominant Western traditions of possessive individualism and positivism, there has also been a suppressed but perennially emergent tradition of intersubjectivity and dynamism. It is the latter, never-quite-realized tradition to which Graeber would like anthropology to turn in its contemplation of value. Actions, or, more precisely, the latent capacity to act and the means by which people make this capacity visible, are his analytical grail. Graeber wants to know, for example, why items of adornment so often become trade media—why something used to draw attention to the visible part of a person's body should also be the most appropriate thing to make manifest a person's invisible intentions, insofar as economic activities are revelatory of certain categories of intent. To Graeber's credit, he does not then resort to vacuous notions of "performativity," even when discussing the drama-obsessed Kwakiutl. And "action" for him is not the same as Bourdieu's "practice," which Graeber finds too economic (in the formalist sense) to account for why people choose certain actions and transactions over others. So what is it?

At this point the most interesting part of Graeber's inquiry also becomes its most problematic. In an effort to distinguish action as an undertheorized area of social life, he makes a number of

idiosyncratic forays into psychology, philosophy, and social history, some of which are more successful than others. I found the introduction of Roy Bhaskar's "critical realism" to be illuminating in a consideration of the dynamistic tradition Graeber wishes to champion, but his invocation of Piaget in the same context seemed cosmetic. Graeber's treatments of child development and changing fashions in European men's dress, although distracting, do not cause irreparable damage to the flow of his argument.

These detours do, however, highlight the fact that Graeber is far more persuasive in his own idiom, the most compelling instance of which is in the dialogue he establishes between what he calls Marxian "cynicism" and Maussian "naïveté"—that is, between a denial that action is possible outside of a totalizing system versus a denial that such a system exists. Graeber argues that it is possible both to critique capitalist relations and imagine their alternatives. To do so requires that we take seriously capacities like creativity: This is one of the most important observations Graeber makes. But he moves rather too swiftly to issues of power and the roles of desire in his concluding chapter on fetishism, in which he asks, just how mystified are people by their ideologies? His answer seems to be that people are not so much mystified as deficient in perspectives, a condition that changes during periods of social and economic upheaval. Powerful objects remain powerful because people collapse into them the relations they perceive to have destabilized around them. It is a compelling idea; one only wishes he had paid closer attention to the Melanesian material touched on earlier in his book and considered that some peoples extract the relations they desire from objects regardless of whether or not they are undergoing an epochal shift. They do so because the objects enable the very multiplication of perspectives he claims is absent in nonrevolutionary systems.

Graeber's writing is dexterous, witty, and in places wonderfully poetic. One complaint, however, is that it is not always clear for whom he is writing. The first three chapters are didactic in tone and seem to be aimed at an under-

graduate or nonspecialist audience, whereas the remainder appear to address graduate and professional-level anthropologists. Graeber's thesis is strongest when it is most ethnographically presented, whether he is discussing the emergence of wampum as a wealth item among the Iroquois or the sources of power attendant on Malagasy magical objects. In these phenomena, the value of anthropology (rather than its inverse) emerges almost of its own accord. As Graeber demonstrates, it is and always has been anthropologists who have insisted that the objects we hold up as most valuable ultimately point to the relations we deem most indispensable to our efficacy in the world.

Ethnography in Unstable Places: Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change. Carol Greenhouse, Elizabeth Mertz, and Kay B. Warren, eds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 439 pp., bibliography, index.

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Traveling between Rwanda and Cambodia, I had an eight-hour layover in Singapore. While in the airport, I watched a TV documentary about fire, fascinated by its discussion of the concept of "commitment" in the science of human behavior in fire. Apparently, when threatened by fire people exhibit an extraordinary reluctance to abandon whatever they are doing, even when it is obvious that they are in imminent danger. Firefighters battle this tendency not only in the civilians they are rescuing, but also in themselves; many fire-related deaths are attributed to this irrational impulse to cling to a sense of reality that is literally burning up before one's eyes.

I was reminded of this concept while reading *Ethnography in Unstable Places*. This pathbreaking collection of chapters explores some of the most interesting frontiers of ethnographic analysis, in particular the various ways in which people respond to tumultuous (and sometimes catastrophic) political changes. Some of the chapters portray what could be seen as "commitment" to a social reality that is in fact going up

in flames. Carroll Lewin describes how Jewish Ghetto leaders in Poland and Lithuania, faced with evidence of impending annihilation by the Nazis, continued to behave as if collegiality and rational decision making would prevent or forestall their destruction (here the fire analogy becomes excruciatingly literal). A similar process plays out among the Palestinian feminist activists in Israel described by Elizabeth Faier. Although these women are intellectually and philosophically committed to pursuing equal rights for women at the societal level, they nevertheless exhibit great ambivalence about altering their own behaviors and appearances for fear that they will "dishonor" their husbands, brothers, and fathers. With full knowledge of the violence perpetrated against women all around them, they are unwilling to completely transgress the forces that oppress and threaten them—unwilling to flee the fire, so to speak.

More than an exploration of individuals' and communities' ambiguous responses to forces of change that will inevitably alter their lives, the book also argues that "under circumstances of extreme instability and doubt, society itself can become a genre of performance, narrative, remembrance, critique, and hope—even as it loses any stable referent to empirical conditions, places, persons, or predictable propriety" (p. 2). This quotation from Carol Greenhouse's introduction hints at another of the volume's main themes: the challenge to conventional ethnographic inquiry of studying "the zones (literally and figuratively) where people are entangled, abandoned, engaged, and altered by the reconfiguration of states" (p. 4). Recall that even firefighters must battle the impulse to stay in place, doing what they are doing, while the flames draw nearer. So does this collection examine the tendency of anthropologists to frame their analyses spatially and temporally in terms of states—relatively stable political structures that serve as the context, rather than the contents, of our inquiries. The temporal boundaries of our studies, along with concepts like "community" and "field site," often follow from the premise of the state, making it confusing and disorienting to attempt to understand