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Kula Shells and Zombies: Notes on Value

Anonymous

Power relations are played out on the stage of desire. A valued object is a desired object. Value is a means through which culture effects desire. Ideology and culture effect power relations through the medium of value, whereas raw coercion is the simple imposition of the desire of one body on another, against the grain of the latter's desire.

Culture and capitalism have become interpenetrating value systems. For capitalism to function it must penetrate culture; it must overcome value systems that contradict it. Previously, the immaterial was outside the domain of capital, however as capital's domain grows and technology changes, it inches further and further into the immaterial. Images and information are now valuable commodities. The range of objects, emotions and concepts that are reduced to a monetary value becomes greater as capital's penetration into culture grows. Our own cultural limitations on capital are shrinking. Justice as an "eye for an eye" is a moral equation which preceded capitalism. Justice is a value system that has yet to be completely subsumed by capitalist logic, but it has become

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adapted to capital's needs. The blood lust for punishment sold on TV cop shows may function for the benefit of capital but its driving force is distinct from profit. Capitalism was once just one value system among many; now it is the system which attempts to transform all other systems into itself.

When the British and German banana plantation owners first tried to get the Bakweri of West Cameroon to work for them, few Bakweri would submit. Those that avoided plantation work thought that workers were members of a witchcraft association. They believed that the workers killed their relatives and children by turning them into zombies and making them work on some far away mountain, where the witch masters had a modern town. In the 1950s the Bakweri cultivated bananas collectively, and the witchcraft stopped. In the 1960s when the price of bananas fell the witches came back. The elders said that no one should pick money off the ground because money was being scattered by Frenchmen to draw men to the waterside where they would be employed as zombies to construct a new harbor. These stories of zombies and witchcraft must have discouraged not a few Bakweri from engaging in wage labor and for a good reason: they are in a sense true stories. Zombies are dead and wage labor sucks the life-blood out of workers. For those that have a non-capitalist system of value circulation and production, wage labor is often incomprehensible and unnecessary. The need for money must be imposed. People only submit to wage labor when they are no longer self sufficient, the theft of peasant lands is often the only thing that will turn peasants into workers. Bakweris that refused to work on plantations continued to understand wage labor from the perspective of their own cultural logic and not that of capital.

Cultures that still consider that certain objects can never be sold and thus have exclusively qualitative value, reveal to us the brutal indiscriminacy of the general equivalent, by stark contrast. Money is after all the most indiscriminate of whores. In the New Guinea region, *Kula* arm shells and necklaces circulate among many islands

and eventually return to their origin through a series of gift donations. The only time that they are traded is when a young man receives his first *kula* shell. On that occasion the shell can only be traded for specific restricted types of goods and services. *Kula* shells are gifts that cement trade partnerships, but they must eventually be reciprocated if a trade partnership is to continue. *Kula* shells are given names and are said to not ever die, their origin and path is remembered; they therefore bring fame to *kula* givers. The giving and receiving of *kula* shells structures a trade network but *kula* shells are not merely a means to acquire goods, they also generate prestige for the donor. Thus this trade network does not only produce economic value but also social value. The prestige gained by giving *kula* shells cannot be compared with the status acquired with the purchase of a consumer item. In New Guinea prestige is gained slowly, through a complex of relationships, it has nothing in common with status that can be immediately bought. The day the *kula* shell is traded for money the entire value system and trade network regulated by the *kula* shell will begin to travel down the path of its own destruction.

The Tiv of central Nigeria had 3 categories of flows: consumer goods, prestige goods, and women and children. When the money economy intervened in the Tiv economy, money was categorized as an object of prestige. Money crossed over the traditional boundaries between categories because it began to be used to buy consumer goods by male merchants when previously only women dealt in consumer goods. This is just one of innumerable examples in which money has inserted itself into a non-capitalist economy and broken down its categories of value.

Capitalism becomes hegemonic by bending other systems of value to its logic. Capitalism is a virus but this does not mean that there aren't those who produce its antibodies. To Kill King Abacus is to destroy the capitalist equation, the mechanism of value that is trying to reduce life itself to a mere quantity. There are moments in which culture slows the spread of capital, where cultural

systems of value resist their own transformation into capitalist value. But this does not mean that non-capitalist forms of value are therefore liberatory. Culture is an ineffective weapon against authority. Culture codifies relationships and is a means through which authority is constructed. Culture, capital, justice and law all have their own scales to weigh behavior. They measure, judge and channel human action; they are all coercive. In the absence of value systems desire shoots in new directions. Insurrection is desire rebelling against value.