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Can We Still Write Big Question Sorts of Books?

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About a year ago, I gave my old friend Keith Hart a draft of my new book, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, and asked him what he thought of it. “It’s quite remarkable,” he ultimately replied. “I don’t think anyone has written a book like this in a hundred years.”

The reason I’m not embarrassed to recount the incident is because I’m still not sure it was meant as a compliment. If you think of most books of the sort people used to write a hundred years ago but no longer do—Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, let alone, say, Gobineau’s *Inequality of the Human Races*—there’s usually an excellent reason why they don’t.

But in a way, Keith had it exactly right. The aim of the book was, indeed, to write the sort of book people don’t write any more: a big book, asking big questions, meant to be read widely and spark public debate, but at the same time, without any sacrifice of scholarly rigor. History will judge whether it’s still possible to pull this sort of thing off (let alone whether I’m the person who will be able to do it.) But it struck me that if

there was ever a time, the credit crisis—and near collapse of the global economy in 2008—afforded the perfect opportunity. In the wake of the disaster, it was as if suddenly, everyone wanted to start asking big questions again. Even *The Economist*, that bastion of neoliberal orthodoxy, was running cover headlines like “Capitalism: Was It A Good Idea?” It seemed like it would suddenly be possible to have a real conversation, to start asking not just “what on earth is a credit default swap?” but “What is money, anyway? Debt? Society? The market? Are debts different from other sorts of promises? Why do we treat them as if they were? Are existing economic arrangements really, as we’ve been told for so long, the only possible ones?”

That lasted about three weeks and then governments put a 13-trillion dollar band-aid over the problem and started the usual chant of “move along, move along, there’s nothing to see here.”

Still, it strikes me this is likely to be only a temporary hiatus. Just as the true crisis shows every sign of having been merely postponed, so has the conversation been put on hold. Someone has got to try to start it up again, and who better than anthropologists—those scholars whose appointed role, at least in the past, has been to remind everyone that social possibilities are far more rich and wide-ranging than we normally imagine—to try to kick it off?

Given *Savage Minds*’ dedication to “increasing the public face of anthropology” I thought this might be an interesting place to discuss the issue—and the editors agreed. They suggested, however, that rather than writing one long screed, I write a series of shorter posts, which are easier to digest and tend to spark more focused discussion.

So I will start by talking about some of the issues I grappled with when trying to put together the debt book, hopefully, to compare notes with others out there who have done, or thinking about doing, something along the same lines.

a few to make sure I was on the level. It’s an interesting comment on academia that we almost never do this. To the contrary: I’ve noticed whole small academic literatures based on footnotes in *Mauss* where clearly no one ever bothered to look up the cited sources (since they don’t say anything like he claims they did.) I’ve seen two reviews of my own work, published in very prestigious academic journals, where veritably no statement made about the contents of the book was accurate—I mean, with statements that were just over-the-top false, or obviously dishonest, like taking quotes from the book and removing the word “not” from them—and apparently, despite the fact that they were also hatchet jobs, the editor just waved them ahead unchecked. Ironically, no such a review could ever have been published in a magazine like *Harpers* or *The Nation*, where there are battalions of fact-checkers who literally test every statement a writer submits for factual accuracy.

So that’s a start: be an even more conscientious scholar, don’t waste time arguing with other academics unless there’s a reason to, and entertaining digressions are okay, especially, if clearly marked as such. Let me leave with that and come back and throw out something about the actual content next week.

- Jokes and little stories, often off-set like quotes, are helpful. Zizek pioneered this but I think it works out (though some of his own are getting a bit repetitive at this point). Mainstream editors don't seem to like Bourdieu-style alternating between different fonts or styles of print, but if they can be prevailed upon, readers actually seem to like it.
- *Mainstream audiences don't care what other scholar is wrong.* This cannot be emphasized enough. The difference between an academic work and a scholarly-but-not-academic work mainly comes down to this. Nobody wants to hear why your approach to the Oedipus myth is better than Levi-Strauss, let alone, what flawed assumptions caused Levi-Strauss to get it so terribly wrong, and how Rene Girard does rather better but is still not as right as me because he overlooked... whatever. No. Resist! Just tell them something interesting and new about Oedipus and why this take might actually be true. Obviously, if you are critiquing things that actually are common wisdom (Adam Smith's theory of the origin of money, in my case...) that's different. But if it's an in-house quarrel, keep it for in-house publications. Or the footnotes.
- About those footnotes: back up your statements with extensive, detailed references that actually do say what you think they say. Good scholarship is *more* appreciated by popular audiences than academic ones. This is a bit scandalous but I have found it to be true. I have about 100 pages of notes and bibliography in the book and non-academics commenting on the book rarely fail to note, approvingly, that I don't ask anyone to take my word for what I say, but back up all my claims with numerous references. Some show signs of actually having checked

In the past, I have mainly written either for academic audiences, political/activist audiences, or occasionally both. This one was to be different. I was writing for a commercial press (Melville House) with a much larger, popular audience, in mind—potentially, given the subject-matter, one including popular economics buffs (a sizeable population in the US) and followers of current political affairs.

So: what was to be the model for a big questions sort of book, and how to write a book that would still be scholarly, but not academic?

This is what I came up with:

Of all the models I considered, the most amenable turned out to be the approach adopted by Marcel Mauss. This might seem odd, especially because Mauss never actually wrote a book; he's mainly famous for a series of essays. Yet many of these essays—not just the Gift, but his essay on the person, techniques of the body (where he coins the term “habitus”), sacrifice and magic—really have had a profound effect both on all subsequent scholarship, and, to differing degrees, political and social debates ever since. Mauss had an uncanny ability to ask the right questions—often, questions he was the first to pose, and which have become mainstays of theoretical debate ever since. His was also an appealing model because Mauss was both a serious, committed activist (he was especially active in the French cooperative movement), and a scholar of remarkable erudition. His problem—and this, I suspect, is why he never did write a proper book, despite numerous attempts—was that he was also almost unimaginably disorganized, and therefore, terrible at exposition. I suspect if alive today he would have been quickly diagnosed with severe ADD.

Still, this basic organizational structure struck me as still viable. Basically, what Mauss would do would be to first frame his question—“what is it that makes the market seem so morally hollow?” or “how did we end up coming to attach such significance to the individual?”—and then both bring

a wide range of ethnographic examples to bear, but also, to frame his question in the grandest possible scale of world history. Obviously, nowadays, one would not frame one's history in quite the same way. There was always a certain evolutionist strain in Mauss' writing. But if you read his arguments carefully, evolutionist assumptions are always in tension with an equally powerful insistence that almost all social possibilities—democracy and monarchy, individualism and communism, gifts and money—are simultaneously present in *any* social context, and always have been, and that all that really varies from age to age is how they come together, and which tend to be seized on and promoted over the others as the truly defining features of society or human nature. It struck me that if one develops this strain, and makes it explicit, the larger structure still works: and this is precisely how I organized the debt book. First I set out the principles that one can assume will always be at play. Examples of these are: the three moral logics that can be appealed to in economic transactions—which I labeled as “communism” (after Mauss), “exchange,” and “hierarchy”—or the dual nature of money (after Keith Hart), as simultaneously commodity and social relation (or more specifically, virtual credit system.) Then I moved from ethnographic comparison to constructing a grand historical narrative, though in my case, demonstrating more that history seems to follow a pattern of alternating cycles dominated by virtual credit money, and bullion money, than that it's going in any particular overall direction.

But what about the style? How to write the sort of book one wishes Mauss would have written, rather than the sort of difficult, convoluted, frequently disorganized essays he actually did?

At least in the English-speaking world, there have been two dominant approaches taken by scholars trying to reach a broader audience. One might be deemed the Pop Mode, familiar from people who most anthropologists dislike, like say

Jared Diamond, or Evolutionary Psychologists, or in the area of money, perhaps Jack Weatherford. In Pop Mode, one affects an accessible and breezy style, much easier to understand than ordinary academic prose, but, rather than seriously challenging one's audiences' assumptions, essentially provides them with reasons they never would have thought of to continue to believe what they already assume to be true. (By the way, I didn't make up this definition of pop scholarship, but now I can't remember where I got it from.) The alternative is the exact opposite. I'll dub it the Delphic or Oracular mode (this term I am making up on the spot, but I think it kind of works.) This is the approach of, say, Deleuze or Baudrillard, or actually, almost any of the trendy French, German, or Italian theorists who gain followers outside of academia, usually in bohemia or among those working in the culture industry. Here the aim is usually to challenge as many common-sense assumptions as possible, but also, to do it in a style even more obscure than ordinary academic writing—so obscure, in fact, that its very obscurity generates a kind of charismatic authority, as devotees spend untold hours of their lives arguing with one another about what their favorite Great Thinker might have actually been on about.

Neither seemed particularly appealing, and anyway, the second isn't really an option for an Anglophone scholar—we are generally only allowed to be secondary interpreters, or at best, perhaps, like Michael Hardt, Batman-and-Robin-style faithful sidekick, to some Continental oracle. What then the alternative?

Well, the book is my answer. An accessible work, written in plain English, that actually does try to systematically challenge common sense assumptions. The problem is that merely trying to write accessibly isn't enough. I had to confront any number of other issues both about style and content, and some of the results are worth contemplating – or at least passing on. Here are three things I think I learned: