

ON DIFFERENCE AND DEVALUATION IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

Notes on Exploitation in a Myanmar Squatter Settlement

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Introduction

Anthropology as a discipline remains haunted by the dichotomy of identity and difference. We see this in anthropological engagements with the so-called informal economy. But here, anthropology is not alone. For with such dichotomous thinking, the discipline echoes dominant economic analysis, albeit in the language of critique.

Consider the literature on the restructuring of labor since the late twentieth century—a political economic transformation that has been variously labeled neoliberalization, flexibilization, deindustrialization, and the like. The analytical emphasis has been on a shift away from normative forms of capitalist wage labor—commonly understood as the Standard Employment Relationship—and a proliferation of precarious, nonstandard forms of labor that are often outside of legal regulation (Breman et. al. 2019; Standing 2011). To be sure, such nonstandard labor arrangements have long been prevalent across the colonial and postcolonial world (Millar 2014; Munck 2013). And within the Global North, women, migrants, and many racialized minorities have often been excluded from full access to ‘standard’ conditions of legally protected employment (Vosko 2009: 1). Nevertheless, ‘modernity’—understood as the mass incorporation of populations into full-time, waged employment with rights and benefits as proscribed by law—is no longer what is expected across

much of the world (Ferguson 1999). Even so, normative claims about 'standard' employment continue to operate ideologically in legitimating the exclusion of marginalized populations from an increasingly narrow liberal labor–capital compact (Barchiesi 2011).

It is in this global political-economic context that anthropologists have investigated various forms of nonstandard labor, which are typically not covered by existing labor protection laws. And it is here, I suggest, that anthropologists have fallen back on a classical bifurcation in terms of identity and difference. For in critiquing the flat universalism of dominant economic theory, wherein 'free' wage labor is privileged as axiomatic of capitalist modernity, anthropologists have pursued what Marshal Sahlins (2013) celebrates as anthropology's proper disciplinary focus: alterity—the state of being other (see Bessire and Bond 2014: 440). Anna Tsing (2015: 66) thus identifies as noncapitalist the unwaged labor of mushroom collectors who scavenge in the forests of the northwestern United States. Brenda Chalfin (2019: 505), meanwhile, sees as a surplus population—a population whose labor is surplus to capital—informal waste collectors who labor on rubbish dumps near the Ghanian city of Ashaiman. And James Ferguson (2015: 23, 90) tells us that residents of urban slums in sub-Saharan Africa, whose labor remains unwaged, are uninvolved in systems of capitalist production.

The irony is that, by identifying such nonstandard forms of labor as outside of capitalist production, these anthropological critiques of dominant economic theorizing converge with liberal-historical narratives that have erased the constitutive role of slavery and colonial plunder in the making of Euro-American capitalist modernity. The constitutive importance of plantation slavery in this respect was central to Sidney Mintz's (1985) historical anthropology of sugar in the making of the modern world. Lisa Lowe (2015) has similarly traced the significance of New World slavery and 'unfree' indentured labor in the historical making of European liberalism. However, as Lowe points out, this constitutive role of African slavery and Asian indentured servitude has consistently been erased in sanitized liberal narratives that delimit European capitalist modernity as having wholly endogenous origins. Such historical erasures illustrate what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) condemned as 'silencing the past' in dominant Euro-American historical narratives. What is more, such liberal historiographic conventions mirror the inverse anthropological practice of ignoring the constitutive effects of colonial rule when studying colonized peoples as though they were bounded, ahistorical ethnic groups—a practice within British social anthropology that Talal Asad

(1973) incisively critiqued in his classic volume, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (see also Wolf 1982). As for the present, even celebratory accounts of ‘entrepreneurial’ informality have conceptualized the latter as distinct from, rather than constitutive of, the ‘modern market economy’ (De Soto 1986). The effect of thus construing difference as ontological (instead of relational) has been to sanitize liberal capitalist modernity by erasing its mutually constitutive relationship to an often illiberally subordinated other.

In the present chapter, I argue that ethnographic engagement with so-called informal labor offers an important means of challenging the simplistic dichotomy highlighted above—a dichotomy that has influenced both liberal and Marxist conceptions of capitalism. To this end, I consider below several earlier anthropological debates regarding (monistic) identity and (dualistic) difference. I then turn to my own ethnographic research on heterogeneous forms of labor, focusing mostly on a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar’s former capital, but with additional examples drawn from my earlier research among Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand. My aim in presenting this research is to illustrate the persistence of capitalist relations in certain ‘non-normative’ labor arrangements, and the ideological devaluation of such labor, which facilitates the exclusion of affected populations from union organizing drives and labor protection legislation, leading thereby to the suppression of their wages, or equivalents thereof. Yet all the while, such nonstandard labor arrangements remain important sites of surplus value extraction, ‘vertically integrated’ into capitalist supply chains. In short, the informal economy may be nonidentical with axiomatic forms of capitalist modernity, but this does not render it wholly exterior to, wholly other than, contemporary capitalist production. It is instead a frontline of value in the ongoing march of capital accumulation upon an uneven political-economic terrain.

Neither a Flat Universalism nor a Fetishism of Difference

Offering important critiques of modernization theory’s universalizing hubris, anthropologists have intervened to highlight enduring forms of labor seemingly ‘other’ to capitalist modernity. Such is the case in Anna Tsing’s (2015: 66) optimistic reading of mushroom foraging in the forests of northwestern United States—a form of non-capitalist labor, she argues, that has sprouted up amid the interstitial ruins of capitalism. For despite its incorporation into capitalist enter-



Figure 2.1. Yangon industrial slum. © Stephen Campbell

prises by way of global supply chains, such labor, Tsing (*ibid.*: 296, n.4) argues, operates ‘outside capitalist logics.’ More pessimistically, James Ferguson (2015: 23) points to the bric-à-brac of informal livelihoods pursued by indigent residents of urban slums in sub-Saharan Africa—livelihoods he sees as ‘functionally isolated’ (*ibid.*: 11) from capitalist production. What analytically unifies such positions has been an appeal to J.K. Gibson-Graham’s (2006: xiii, xxiv, 35) claim that labor outside of free waged employment is noncapitalist by definition, as well as autonomous of capitalist logics. This is a conceptual position that Gibson-Graham (2014) ground in the ontological arguments of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Pertinent to my argument here, the latter were notoriously averse to dialectical analysis (see Campbell 2019a). The result, therefore, of conceiving nonstandard labor ontologically has been a fetishism of difference—fetishism in the sense of abstracting such labor from the constitutive capitalist relations in which it is embedded.

What is notable here is the extent to which current anthropological theorizing of ontological difference echoes a long lineage of dichotomous thinking in the discipline. The roots of such thinking go back to condescending constructions of the ‘savage’ as an ‘other’ to European capitalist modernity. But such was also the gist

of Malinowski's (1922) sympathetic portrayal of Trobriand *kula* exchange as a culturally particularist challenge to British neoclassical economists who aspired to ground *homo economicus* in an ostensibly universal human nature. Opposing perspectives on the matter hardened when Karl Polanyi (1957) took up Malinowski's arguments to inaugurate what came to be known as the formalist-substantivist debate. Never in fact resolved, the debate simply petered out, with most participants missing "possibilities for pragmatic compromise between polar positions," as Chris Hann and Keith Hart (2011: 71) observe. Such dichotomizing persists in the present where anthropologists have construed moral economy, not as political economy's cultural/ideological dimension, but as a spatially distinct logic—the household as opposed to the market, for example (Gregory 1997; see also Kalb in the Introduction to this volume). A last notable instance of dichotomous thinking erupted in the acerbic debate between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere on the matters of rationality and cultural difference. In Victor Li's (2001) distillation of this dispute, "Obeyesekere sees the possibility of a dialectical relation between a common human nature and cultural variation" (216), whereas Sahlins "abandons dialectics for binary contrasts" (248).

As a dialectical tradition, Marxism should have been able to offer a nuanced engagement with such questions of difference. Unfortunately, the weakest responses have been the most prominent. Such was the case with Vivek Chibber's (2013) wooden critique of postcolonial theory, wherein Chibber was unable to see accounts of colonial difference as anything but a post-structuralist attack on "the universalizing categories of Enlightenment thought" (285)—categories Chibber deems crucial to any Marxian project. For Chibber, then, capitalism is universalizing in its spread of waged employment, while difference, insofar as it persists, is only ever a precapitalist holdout, and in a way tragic, as such "antediluvian forms of social domination" (15) will inevitably succumb to the "universalizing mission" of capital. And so, here as well, free wage labor is privileged as axiomatic of capitalist modernity, while capitalism is construed as identical with its axiomatic forms. What is remarkable is that Chibber, in advocating this flat universalism, seems unaware of the extensive literature on uneven and combined development (Trotsky 1930), world-systems theory, Gramsci's "southern question," formal subsumption (Harootunian 2015: 62–72), and "variegated capitalism" (Peck and Theodore 2007), the authors of which have effectively foregrounded the constitutive heterogeneity of capitalism from an explicitly Marxist perspective. In place of such dialectical

analysis, Chibber offers instead a ‘Marxism’ qua positivist sociology that, in Chris Taylor’s (2013) apt summation, “reduces particularity to an accident, a contingency, or something to strip away so that the pure body of universality might appear.”

Stated otherwise, whereas ontological readings of difference posit nonstandard labor arrangements as noncapitalist, claims to an a priori universal untainted by difference have hypostatized capitalism as the expression of a pure logic unmediated by the particular. Both perspectives fail to account for the constitutive heterogeneity of capitalism in its actually existing forms. Missing here is a dialectical anthropology of labor and class that attends to nonstandard labor arrangements, not as ontologically other to capitalism, nor as a soon to be extinct precapitalist relic, but as integral to the variegated capitalism of the present (Carrier and Kalb 2015; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Kasmir and Gill 2018; Kasmir and Gill 2022). What is needed, in short, is a critique of liberal assertions that ‘free’ wage labor and ‘standard’ employment are axiomatic of capitalism in general. Here I follow Theodore Adorno (1993: 39), who advocated as much in his lectures on Hegel: “Hegelian philosophy rests upon the idea that every individual concept is false, or that there is no actual identity between any finite concept and what it is meant to designate. It does indeed designate it, but in being imposed on the heterogeneous by the subject it also always differs from what the thing is in its own right.” Understood thus, nonstandard arrangements of capitalist labor endure without acknowledgment within axiomatic conceptions of capitalist modernity. Yet, these two dimensions of capitalism—as miserly concept and polyphonic object—nonetheless remain in a relation of mutual constitution.

Rejecting, therefore, a flat universalism, I foreground herein nonstandard labor arrangements as nonidentical with axiomatic forms of capitalist modernity. But rejecting, as well, the fetishism of difference, I attend to the capitalist character of such nonstandard labor so as to contest the assertion that capitalist labor is coterminous with its ostensibly axiomatic forms. This is imminent critique, as I understand it. And it is a critique of this sort that I advance in the remainder of this text through a consideration of present-day Myanmar.

The Erasure of Value and the Devaluation of Labor

When Myanmar’s ruling junta announced it would hold multiparty national elections in November of 2010, after nearly fifty years of



Figure 2.2. Yangon industrial slum. © Stephen Campbell

direct military rule, domestic and international observers were by and large incredulous. However, the subsequent transfer of (circumscribed) executive power to a quasi-civilian government in March 2011, an amnesty of political prisoners, a relaxation of media censorship, and the promulgation of new labor protection laws, tempered widespread misgivings. And with the ensuing removal of international trade sanctions, observers at home and abroad began to speak with credulity of the country's 'transition' to a liberal capitalist order. The World Bank (2014: 28), by then financially invested in Myanmar's political economic restructuring, argued that these changes marked the start of a transition to a market-oriented economy that promised to shepherd the country's largely rural population out of 'low-productivity' agrarian livelihoods and into 'good, formal sector jobs' in urban manufacturing and services. Anticipating rapid economic growth, Western financial media began to speak of a metaphorical 'gold rush' in Myanmar (*National Post* 2012) and a 'last frontier' for windfall investment returns (Kent 2012). In this context, major international corporations, which had previously been wary of having their brands tarnished by association with the country's blatantly illiberal labor practices, embraced the opportunity to invest in what was among the cheapest labor markets in Asia (Banerjee 2019). Before

long, international apparel brands like H&M, Zara, Adidas, and Gap were sourcing their products from the mostly Chinese-owned factories in Myanmar's nascent garment and footwear industry (Mullins 2015). Academics, meanwhile, foretold of Myanmar's "tentative renaissance" (Farrelly and Gabusi 2015). As for poverty, while admittedly widespread, it came to be seen as a largely rural matter, affecting individuals "untouched by the gains [of] the new economy" (Thawngmung 2019: 3–4).

In this way, Myanmar's transition narrative came to reflect conventional modernization theory, and notably the dual-sector model that Arthur Lewis (1954) advanced shortly after World War II. With this model, Lewis proposed that, in newly independent countries, domestic industrial development would draw labor out of a pre-capitalist agrarian economy and into urban capitalist employment. It was in this vein that Keith Hart subsequently conceptualized the so-called informal sector—a sector, Hart (1973) argued, encompassing ad hoc forms of unregulated self-employment that rural-to-urban migrants adopted until they achieved entry into formal wage labor. In Myanmar, then, the contemporary transition narrative reiterates an old tale whereby "good, formal sector jobs" are promised as that which defines liberal capitalist modernity.

At least that was the idea. On the ground, Myanmar's transition has in fact been a continuation of decades-long postsocialist restructuring, which a reconstituted military junta initiated following the 1988 popular uprising against military-dominated state capitalism. Characterizing this extended period of political economic restructuring have been widespread land confiscation by military and corporate actors (Mark and Belton 2020), rural dispossession through market transactions (Woods 2020), a decline in agricultural employment (Myat Thida Win and Aye Mya Thinzar 2016), and a massive increase in household debt (Griffiths 2018; Fujita 2009). The outcome, in short, has been an exacerbated market dependence for the bulk of the population. And it is this generalized market dependence, as market compulsion, that qualifies Myanmar's present conditions as constitutively capitalist (see Li 2014; Wood 1999).

In response, the country's overwhelmingly rural population has migrated in large numbers to neighboring countries (Campbell 2018a), and to plantations, fish farms, mines, and industrial zones elsewhere in Myanmar (Griffiths and Ito 2016). For internal migrants arriving at large urban centers, like Yangon, real estate inflation has created a nearly insurmountable barrier to accessing housing through formal rental markets (Campbell 2019b). The result has been

a proliferation of informal squatter settlements spread across urban industrial peripheries. In Yangon, hundreds of settlements of this sort now house close to half a million residents (Forbes 2016: 207). As ex-rural dwellers, such squatters are the very individuals to whom the World Bank holds out the promise of ‘good, formal sector jobs.’ To the extent, therefore, that such individuals have not accessed jobs of this sort, they remain, conceptually, outside of Myanmar’s current transition, as though *not yet* incorporated into liberal capitalist modernity. Yet insofar as their labor—often unwaged, often unfree, and often in violation of formal labor protections—is conditioned, all the same, by market compulsions, it remains, I will argue, still constitutively capitalist.

In domestic English-language media, such informal settlements have been variously called slums, shantytowns, and squatter settlements. In Burmese, they are most often labelled *kyu kyaw*—a term that translates into English as trespasser or invader. Invoking such condemnatory language, news media and government officials regularly decry such settlements as sites of illegality and unsanitary behavior, and as breeding grounds for disease (e.g., Aung Phay Kyi Soe 2020; Phyo Wai Kyaw 2018). They are, in short, matter out of place (Douglas 1966), and as such they disrupt the conceptual purity of the city as a site of legality and formal rule. Such loaded characterizations, which give rise to an ideological devaluation, have legitimized the under-provision of government infrastructure, and have served as a precursor to eviction, as settlements of this sort are regularly targeted for removal to make way for industrial development and elite residential enclaves. Such is the case for rural areas also, where claims of ‘low-productivity’ agrarian livelihoods serve to legitimate rural dispossession. This devaluation–eviction combination follows a pattern in urban governance globally, as research on gentrification has effectively documented (Morell 2015, 2018; Smith 1996). Simply put, devaluation is a core relational component of dispossession (Harvey 2003: 150). Together, dispossession and devaluation dialectically constitute a regime of value that undergirds informal living arrangements.

In one notorious case from 2017, the Yangon regional government dispatched some two hundred police officers along with upwards of seven hundred ‘hired heavies’ armed with clubs, swords, axes, and chainsaws to demolish all residences at a settlement of about four thousand squatter households located in Yangon Region’s northern Hlegu Township (Moe Myint 2017). None of the evicted squatters received any compensation. Motivating the eviction, the Yangon



Figure 2.3. Yangon slum labor. © Stephen Campbell

government had recently entered into partnership with an unnamed private company that was planning to develop the area into a high-end residential estate with an accompanying golf course and private hospital (Wa Lone 2017).

On the one hand, such treatment of slum populations—devaluation, infrastructural neglect, under-provisioning of services, and at times eviction—suggests an attitude of ‘let die’ following from the apparent redundancy of such populations to the needs of capital (Li 2010). And indeed, such a conceptualization of slum residents informs Ferguson’s (2015: 11, 23, 90) characterization of said individuals as a population ‘functionally isolated’ from capitalist production. Considered historically and globally, however, governments and capitalist employers have regularly ‘allowed’ the early death of individuals even with regular employment in capitalist enterprises (see Karmel 2019). The implication here is that an attitude of ‘let die’ on the part of governments and owners of capital cannot be read as indicating, in itself, that affected populations are functionally isolated from capitalist production.

In fact, the opposite is often the case, as ideological boundary work can serve to demarcate populations *seemingly* redundant to capital whose labor nonetheless remains integral to capital accumulation.

Stated otherwise, capitalism requires regular creation of ‘surplus populations’ — the latter thus being *inherent* to capitalism. Such is Jason Moore’s (2015, ch.9) argument concerning the material-symbolic fashioning of ‘cheap labor,’ whereby labor that remains wholly or partly uncommodified serves to subsidize capitalist production elsewhere. Moore’s primary referent on this matter is the unpaid labor of social reproduction, as theorized in the feminist literature on the subject since the 1970s. Sylvia Federici (2012: 28), for example, has argued that the exploitation of unwaged workers — not only ‘housewives,’ but also slaves, colonial subjects, prisoners, and students (see Mateescu and Kalb, this volume) — has been all the more effective than waged exploitation “because the lack of a wage hid it . . . where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.” For the ideological work involved here, Nancy Fraser (2016: 103) employs the term ‘boundary struggles,’ understood as contestations over the drawing of “boundaries delimiting ‘economy’ from ‘society,’ ‘production’ from ‘reproduction,’ and ‘work’ from ‘family’” — frontlines of value, we call them in this collection.

The literature on social reproduction has primarily attended to unpaid domestic work. However, Alexander Chayanov’s (1991: 6) earlier theorization of self-exploitation involved a similar argument regarding peasant farms that had been ‘vertically integrated’ into the value chains of capitalist enterprises, such that peasant agriculture became reorganized ‘according to capitalist principles,’ but in which financial returns on peasant labor time remained below that of workers engaged in equivalent waged employment. Both Giovanni Arrighi (1970) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1976) argued that, for similar reasons, capital has often sought to maintain conditions of semi-proletarianization, and thus *prevent* full proletarianization. In such cases of ‘household’ production, as with the unpaid labor of social reproduction, the material-symbolic work of narrowly delimiting normative capitalist labor is critical to the reproduction of a poorly remunerated, non-normative ‘other,’ laboring as the unacknowledged and ‘informal’ underbelly of formal capital accumulation.

In a similar manner, within contemporary Myanmar, the precarious informal economy has served to enrich an emerging bourgeoisie and subsidize an emerging middle class — both of which claim privileged status grounded in the ‘formal’ economy. It is, then, to such nonstandard forms of labor that I turn in the section that follows. My aim is to establish the capitalist character of such labor, and to contest characterizations that would construe such labor as outside of Myanmar’s emerging capitalist modernity. I turn, therefore, to eth-

nographic research that I began in 2017 with residents of Yadana, as I am calling it—a squatter settlement of approximately one thousand households sandwiched between garment factories and storage depots on the industrial outskirts of Yangon.

The Mushroom at the Heart of Capital

By the time Aunty Cho quit working at the riverside gravel depot, she had been at it four years—four years bearing baskets of sand, bricks, and gravel on her shoulder as she loaded and unloaded shipments at the river’s edge, in the industrial zone where she resided. The work had already given her husband, Hla Soe, a repetitive strain injury in his foot that, on a doctor’s instructions, had put an end to his own career as a porter of sand, bricks, and gravel. And so, when Aunty Cho, by then well into her forties, decided to likewise exit this so-demanding labor, the depot owner promptly evicted the couple from their onsite quarters, together with their two young daughters. It was at this point that the family moved into a bamboo and dani palm hut in the Yadana squatter settlement, which lay just minutes down the road from the depot where wife and husband had until recently labored.¹

By then, the three industrial plots on which the settlement lay were at capacity. There being no vacant land on which to build a hut of their own, the couple were left having to rent lodgings from a veteran squatter who had arrived early enough to claim land on which to build one residence for himself and another for use as rental property. It was upon moving into said accommodations that Aunty Cho and Hla Soe began collecting waste for resale—a livelihood pursued by hundreds of the settlement’s residents. Like most residents of the Yadana squatter settlement, the couple were refugees from the delta, having migrated to Yangon following the 2008 cyclone Nargis, which had left over 138,000 people dead (three of whom were Aunty Cho’s children). The cyclone had also devastated the delta’s economy and infrastructure, leaving local inhabitants dependent on a market that offered little in the way of employment.

As a rule, the labor of waste collection in the township where Yadana lies requires constant walking. Moreover, the distance to be covered on foot doing this work has only increased with the settlement’s expansion, as heightened competition for discarded plastics, cardboard, and metals has compelled the hundreds of Yadana residents who engage in this labor to walk farther afield and for more

hours each day in order to collect sufficient materials to cover their immediate living expenses. Such was the situation when, one day, Hla Soe encountered a low-ranking official from the local township development committee. The official informed Hla Soe that by paying a monthly fee the latter could obtain monopoly collection rights over the local refuse transfer point. The arrangement would allow Hla Soe and Aunty Cho to acquire saleable materials without having to walk long distances each day. It was an offer the couple readily accepted, and for which they considered themselves lucky—not least given Hla Soe's foot injury.

The arrangement in question here is curious, as not once did the couple receive any sort of receipt for the fee that they paid each month to obtain sole collection rights at this site, which served as the neighborhood trash repository. The agreement remained, in other words, informal. It is also not what is done downtown. There, municipal employees identifiable in fluorescent pinnies earn monthly salaries to collect refuse and to maintain the city's various waste collection points. By contrast, in the peripheral township where Yadana lies, officials of the township development committee had evidently figured out that, not only could they avoid hiring waste workers to carry out said duties, but poor slum residents would be willing to *pay them* for the right to manage these sites.

So, there at the neighborhood refuse transfer point Uncle Hla Soe would sift through items discarded each day, sorting resalable wares according to their respective materials—plastic bottles here, copper wire there. Meanwhile, Aunty Cho, who had suffered no foot injury, continued her rounds through the township's streets and laneways, pushing before her a rusted metal collection cart in which she put whatever items she picked up along the way. The cart, however, was not her own. It belonged instead to Mister Arul, an ethnic Tamil who owned and operated the waste purchasing depot where Aunty Cho and Hla Soe would every couple of weeks sell the plastics, metals, and cardboard they had amassed. Mister Arul, always taciturn and polite, lent this cart out to the couple free of charge. This he likewise did for all fourteen of the households that made use of his collection carts. What is more, he would, on request, lend these same households microcredit interest free. The only requirement, Mister Arul explained one day, while seated at a wooden desk behind a mountain of plastic bottles inside his waste purchasing compound, was that these collectors dutifully sell their wares only to him—meaning not to any of the other thirty or so purchasing depots operating in the township. It was an arrangement that Aunty Cho and Hla Soe

claimed to have not once violated in the two-and-a-half years they had worked collecting discarded items. Reflecting on the mutual commitment involved in this agreement, Mister Arul, still seated at his desk, went on to explain: “We’ve grown close. They would never sell elsewhere.”

It was within this working relationship that Aunty Cho, together with her husband, had repeatedly entered into debt—borrowing 160,000 kyat one year to cover funeral expenses for her mother-in-law and sister, and 120,000 kyat a year later to purchase gold earrings for her two young daughters. But regarding this debt, Aunty Cho seemed unperturbed. She spoke highly of Mister Arul’s amiable character. And as for the debt, Mister Arul as creditor merely deducted manageable repayment amounts from the money he paid to the couple for the items they regularly brought to him for resale. Aunty Cho thus spoke of their relationship as being based on loyalty (*thitsa*), trust (*yongyihmu*), and understanding (*nalehmhu*). But still, the couple were bound by debt to a monopsonistic arrangement—a market, that is, with only a single buyer. It has been arrangements of this sort that have come to be labelled disguised wage labor, for seemingly self-employed sellers in such cases remain bound, as though employees, to a single purchaser who is able to set the price of sale, and who thus comes to operate akin to an employer (Harris-White 2014: 988).

As for the materials that Mister Arul purchases in this way, he sells them to recycling plants in neighboring townships where they are broken down and resold domestically or exported as production materials to industrial manufacturers in China. The labor of Aunty Cho and her husband has thus been integrated into the bottom of an immense global supply chain, the contemporary expansion of which has led to a proliferation of ethnographic studies on informal waste reclamation in, for example, India (Gill 2009), Turkey (Dinler 2016), Ghana (Chalfin 2019), and Brazil (Millar 2018). Taking stock of the incorporation of such ‘informal’ workers into this now massive ‘formal’ global industry, Kathleen Millar (2018: 8) has rightly argued that if such laborers are deemed “superfluous to capital accumulation, then it becomes impossible to ask how the materials they collect are tied into a 200-billion-dollar global recycling industry.” What is more, in neighboring Thailand, where I have conducted related research on waste reclamation, the expansion of this ‘informal’ industry is due in large measure to government initiatives explicitly aimed at outsourcing and thereby subsidizing the country’s growing waste disposal needs (Campbell 2018b: 280). All of this illustrates how the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ are not distinct economic sectors, but rather

mutually constitutive aspects of capital accumulation everywhere (see also Neveling 2014).

A similar arrangement among foragers of matsutake mushrooms informs Anna Tsing's (2015: 63) concept of *salvage accumulation*: "the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced." It was with this understanding that Tsing (*ibid.*: 296, n.4) proceeded to characterize such labor as operating "outside capitalist logics." However, aside from a capitalist context of generalized market compulsions, the logics of debt relations—about which Tsing does not speak—means seemingly self-employed producers like Auntie Cho cannot be deemed wholly free of capitalist control. Instead, the arrangement is akin to what Chayanov (1991) identified as vertical capitalist integration, and what Marx ([1867] 1976: 1020–21) spoke of as the formal subsumption of labor to capital, as seen in the putting-out arrangements of England's early modern textile industry, where merchant capitalists dispensed in-kind advances to maintain indirect control over peasant's home-based production. In such arrangements, peasants whose textile production was limited to seasonal cottage industry were able to keep production costs down by employing unpaid family labor (including that of children), engaging in longer work hours despite decreasing marginal returns (self-exploitation), and subsidizing household consumption with domestically produced agriculture. Such labor was not, and is not, however, wholly 'outside' of capitalist logics. In fact, such arrangements have proliferated in the present under the flexibilization of industrial production, as in Thailand's garment sector, where the introduction of putting-out arrangements has allowed managers to complement factory production by shifting certain tasks to outworkers not covered by existing labor laws (Campbell 2016). In these ways, the frontline spaces of value in capitalist modernity remain structured by a "coexistence of formal and real subsumption" (Mezzadra 2011: 314).

Such arrangements are more ambiguous, however, where children labor without wages alongside their parents on the factory floor. This was the case with 16-year-old Su Su, a resident of Yadana who had started working alongside her mother at the age of nine. The girl's mother, persistently in debt and working piece rate in a shrimp processing plant at the time, had felt it necessary to bring Su Su along to help increase her output, and thus her wages. As a child laborer, nine-year-old Su Su had not been alone; there were other children her age and older laboring alongside their mothers in the shrimp plant's casual workforce. Tasked with peeling and beheading prawns as an

unregistered ‘helper,’ Su Su’s output was incorporated with that of her mother; the girl received no separate wage. Her mother, however, used their combined income to support their entire household. And although she labored on the factory floor, Su Su was not in any direct employment relationship with the factory manager. Her position was thus similar to the unwaged children who assist their mothers with piece rate trimming under putting-out arrangements in the home, as I have documented in Thailand’s garment sector (Campbell 2016: 78).

Overlapping with the exclusion of home-based workers from labor protection legislation has been the ideological devaluation of such nonstandard labor forms, which have often been highly feminized. Such were the findings of Maria Mies’s (1982) path-breaking study of the lace industry in Narsapur, India. Documenting what she would later call ‘housewifization,’ Mies found that merchant capitalists characterized the women who made lace under putting-out arrangements as ‘housewives’ so as to construe their incomes as merely supplemental to that of their husbands or fathers as primary breadwinners. This devaluation of women’s labor in putting-out arrangements facilitated the latter’s ongoing exclusion from labor protection laws and union organizing drives. It has, moreover, been the consequently lower cost of such labor and the exclusion of affected workers from labor protection laws that ensures such nonstandard labor arrangements remain attractive alternatives to more directly managed labor employed in-house. In this regard, consider the Uber Corporation’s relentless efforts to keep their drivers legally classified as ‘independent contractors’ rather than employees, and to construe said driving as merely a source of ‘supplementary’ part-time income. This legal-ideological move situates affected drivers outside of labor protection laws and minimum wage regulations. Going further, Uber has extended car loans to prospective drivers, thus bonding indebted individuals to the labor arrangement—the drivers’ loan repayments “taken straight out of their wages” (Hook 2016).

To be sure, workers in such arrangements often value the relative autonomy of laboring outside direct capitalist management. Some of Tsing’s (2015: 77) interlocutors, for example, went so far as to assert that, for this reason, they did not consider their labor of foraging to be ‘work.’ Nevertheless, where workers in such seemingly independent arrangements lack alternative means of support—as is the case in Myanmar—they remain compelled by the market to produce commodities whose value can only be realized on the market. Their situation becomes even more like ‘work’ when carried out under conditions of debt. Take, for example, Aunty Cho’s neighbor, Aye

Win, who pursued, as a means of livelihood, the scavenging of earth worms that she sold for use as bait to a local eel merchant—a man to whom she was also indebted. While Aye Win at first labeled her occupation self-employment (*kobaing alok*), she would, as we spoke, occasionally slip into calling the merchant her employer (*alokshin*). The same eel merchant had also lent hundreds of thousands of kyat for the purchase of motorcycles to several young men at Yadana who were expected to use these vehicles to transport the eels they trapped in dispersed urban pools of stagnant water. It was due to the large debts these collectors had with the eel merchant that Aye Win considered eel hunting, even more so than worm collection, an employment relation. “You can’t call eel catchers self-employed,” she asserted. “They’ve borrowed so much money from the eel merchant that if they take a day or two off, the merchant will get after them. If they have a health issue, they’re allowed to rest. But if they don’t have a health issue, they’re not allowed to rest.” It is worth noting here that eel merchants, as well as the owners of waste purchasing depots, could, in principle, hire their collectors as wage laborers. Such arrangements, however, would presumably increase labor costs for the merchants in question, and affected workers would come under the scope of existing labor protection laws—laws that, admittedly, remain poorly enforced in Myanmar.

Much, therefore, as Chayanov documented among Russian peasants, the labor of eel collection and that of informal waste reclamation have been ‘vertically integrated’ into capitalist production networks. And rather than being autonomous of capitalist logics, the work in question is being managed by merchant capitalists who act as coordinators of a dispersed division of labor. Nonstandard forms of capitalist labor in such cases are thus not precapitalist relics destined to give way to waged employment under the ‘universalizing mission’ of capital. Instead, such arrangements have proliferated under the precarious conditions of Myanmar’s postsocialist entry into capitalism.

To return now to Aunty Cho and her husband, the couple resided, as I have said, at Yadana with their two youngest daughters. However, they had, as well, two other daughters—now adults—who at the time were living elsewhere. But in mid-2019, their eldest daughter, Su Myat, then 28 years old, came to stay with her parents at Yadana temporarily. It had by then been almost twenty years since she had lived with her parents, having been taken from her home when she was nine. “We were living hand-to-mouth,” recalled Aunty Cho of those years. Mired in cyclical debt, Aunty Cho and Hla Soe had at the time been attempting to get by on casual labor in fishing

and agriculture. It had been under these conditions that, one day, Su Myat's grandmother took her away. Informing the girl that she was to be employed as a domestic helper, her grandmother deposited her with a household across the river, took a three-month advance on the child's wages, and left. "I'd never been apart from my mother," recounted Sister Myat, "so I cried when she took me away. I didn't have any clothes or sandals with me. Grandma took me away and I cried as I went along with her. Grandma said to me, 'Your family is in a difficult situation, so don't cry. You have to do this for them.'" It had likewise been her grandmother who, from then on, went to collect regular advances on the girl's wages; her mother stayed away. "Had I gone," explained Aunty Cho, "she would've wanted to return with me."

As a domestic servant, Sister Myat had been responsible for cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her employer's children—in other words, the labor of social reproduction. Sister Myat recalled of that first household:

The employer wouldn't let me go out; I was in someone else's home, so for the most part I didn't have freedom; [and further], as a nine-year-old daughter, I was just a child—there was so much I didn't know. So, of course, I got beaten. I got yelled at. I was a child, so I might break a pot, and for that I'd get beaten.

After two years, Sister Myat's employer, a part-owner in a rice milling enterprise, fell into economic distress of his own and could no longer afford to retain the child. The girl's grandmother therefore took her to a new employer—a middle-aged woman who ran an alcohol parlor in a neighboring village. As proprietor, the woman made Sister Myat—11 years old at the time—labor as a waitress in the alcohol parlor, on top of her domestic duties. But regarding the hours she had worked or the money she had earned, Sister Myat could not say. "Back then, I didn't really understand money matters," she explained. "As I couldn't read, I never knew what day it was. And I didn't know how to read a clock." Like that, Sister Myat went on to change employers every few years, working as a domestic servant until she got married at 24 years of age to a young man from her natal village. By then, she had worked for eight households—her grandmother having collected her wages in advance up to the end, leaving the young woman perennially debt-bound to each consecutive employer.

Tragic though her case may have been, Sister Myat's childhood as a physically abused and debt-bound domestic servant, pressed into employment by her own family, was in no way exceptional

in Myanmar. In research carried out by the International Labor Organization, 26 percent of internal labor migrants surveyed in Myanmar were found to be in situations of bonded or other unfree labor, with 14 percent of them having been trafficked into these labor arrangements (ILO 2015: 6). Overlapping with these statistics, there were (as of 2018) 1.2 million child laborers in the country, aged 5 to 17, who worked an average of 52 hours per week, typically in conditions of debt bondage (Nyein Nyein 2018). In this context, Myanmar investigative journalists have brought to light horrific cases of domestic worker abuse—specifically, cases of employers beating, burning, scalding, and cutting their underage domestic servants with knives (Hla Hla Htay 2017; Ye Naing 2017).

For residents of the Yadana settlement, the sort of live-in domestic work in which Su Myat was employed remains uncommon. ‘Unfree labor,’ however, is not. Every year, dozens of young men from this settlement take what seem to be large cash advances in exchange for their commitment to work eight months at sea in the Gulf of Martaban on motorless bamboo rafts with just two or three other men, facing winds of up to 50 miles per hour, often short of food and drinking water, and tasked with lowering and drawing, every six hours, a 20-to-30 foot long ‘tiger mouth’ net, and then sorting, boiling, and drying on board the catch of mostly prawns. The raft fishing industry has become renowned in Myanmar for fraud, malnutrition, violence, and outright murder (Khin Myat Myat Wai 2018). Bonded by debt, stuck out at sea, and often laboring under threat of violence, it is not a job that one can easily leave.

Consider, now, that Marxists, too, have often accepted the bourgeois claim that capitalism is coterminous with ‘free’ wage labor. Take, for example, Benno Teschke (2003: 141), who puts the argument like this: “Once a capitalist property regime is established. . . direct producers are no longer coerced by extra-economic means to. . . work for a lord—since workers are politically free.” Capitalist labor arrangements are thus to be understood as but “civil contracts among politically (though not economically) free and equal citizens subject to civil law. . . [operating in] a non-coercive ‘economic economy’” (ibid.: 256).

It is this sort of economistic conception of capitalism that informs much of the anti-trafficking activism around ‘modern slavery’ in the offshore fishing industry based out of neighboring Thailand. A scandal over the ‘unfree’ labor in question made headlines globally following a series of exposés in 2015 (McDowell, Mason, and Mendoza 2015; EJF 2015). In this industry, as with the raft fisheries in Myanmar, deception, fraud, violence, and murder have been widely

reported by migrant fishermen, most of whom come from Myanmar. However, concerning the Thai case specifically, geographers Peter Vandergeest and Melissa Marschke have warned against use of the ‘modern slavery’ terminology. Notwithstanding the success of such language in mobilizing action, the “slavery framing reaffirms liberal and capitalist understandings of freedom and exploitation, in how it situates modern slavery as outside of capitalism and as ideologically incompatible with capitalist freedoms” (Vandergeest and Marschke 2019: 293). Such ‘unfree’ labor, in other words, is still capitalist, while capitalism is thereby heterogeneous.

What I have presented here is but a brief survey of certain nonstandard forms of capitalist labor undertaken by residents of the Yadana settlement—specifically, the work of seemingly self-employed scavengers bound by debt to merchant capitalists, and forms of waged employment in ‘unfree’ and often violent conditions of debt bondage. Beyond matters of precarity, what becomes evident when attending ethnographically to such nonstandard labor are the various relational dependencies—of kinship, credit, and rent, for example—that incorporate affected laborers into the broader capitalist social formation (Kalb 2015). Critically, however, in their non-normative informality, such relations escape liberalism’s narrow formal-legal vision of itself, even as they remain constitutive of the liberal capitalist order.

Taken together, the cases considered here illuminate something of the variegated character of contemporary capitalism—in Myanmar specifically, but also more generally. Crucially, there is no evidence that such nonstandard capitalist labor arrangements are in any way ‘antediluvian’ or destined to give way to ‘good, formal sector jobs’ under the momentum of capitalist modernization. Such enduring capitalist heterogeneity therefore calls for a coalitional approach to collective struggles—an approach that would bring together, for example, workplace mobilizations of waged laborers, squatters’ efforts to fight evictions, and movements demanding government support for childcare and other elements of household social reproduction. While not prominently articulated in this way, such interconnected social-political concerns informed the important role that many low-waged, precarious workers (including squatters) took in the mass street protests and general strike that erupted in Myanmar after the military seized power in February 2021 (Campbell 2021). What was particularly notable in the protests and strike was the coalitional participation of diverse segments of Myanmar’s population, including those outside of formal employment. While many protesters articulated their demands in terms of a restoration of electoral

rule under the ousted National League for Democracy government, others expressed more immediate material concerns whose resolution pointed beyond such liberal politics. So, while the implications of this ongoing revolt remain open-ended at the time of writing, the coalitional participation of a diverse spectrum of Myanmar society points toward an emancipatory horizon inclusive of those whom the preceding liberal transition had largely neglected.

Conclusion

One of the aims of this chapter has been to dispel the liberal myth that capitalism is coterminous with ‘free’ wage labor—or, more narrowly, with the Standard Employment Relationship. Instead, in much of the world, ‘nonstandard’ arrangements of capitalist labor are the enduring norm. Labor, consequently, remains needed, though often outside of formal employment. Under such conditions, the narrow ideological construal of capitalist modernity in terms of ‘good, formal sector jobs’ remains politically salient as a legitimizing discourse. Relegating, in this way, certain forms of labor to the ‘outside’ of capital de facto facilitates their devaluation, excludes said labor arrangements from labor protection legislation and minimum wage laws, and exculpates capitalist firms, state institutions, and advocates of a liberal capitalist order from the often-illiberal practices of the informal economy. In this way, value regimes of so-called informal labor, as a frontline of value, are made to serve as the unacknowledged underbelly of formal capital accumulation. Meanwhile, formal state policies and formal capitalist enterprises continue to vertically integrate informal regimes of life and labor into capitalist supply chains. Such life and labor are not, therefore, autonomous of capitalist logics.

Under such conditions, labor formalization, understood as the extension and enforcement of legal protections over select labor arrangements, serves as a manner of hegemonic inclusion (Campbell 2019c). But with so much that remains *excluded*, labor formalization as a hegemonic project continues to be, across most of the world, narrowly *selective* (Smith 2011). Capitalism, in short, remains heterogeneous, while much non-standard labor in the present remains capitalist, rather than ontologically *other*.

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Note

1. Further details of this case were published in Campbell 2020, 733–35.

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