Olivia ANGÉ, Barter and social regeneration in the Argentinian Andes

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REFERENCES


1 Initially published in 2018 and now available in paperback edition, Angé’s Barter and social regeneration in the Argentinian Andes truly demonstrates the epistemic virtue of ethnographic knowledge. Ethnography, by delving into the layers and facets of reality, constantly destabilizes theory. It is a risky endeavor which might involve much subsequent confusion. Not all ethnographies actually take this risk, or manage it well. With this book, Angé does much for the theorization of the economy—a domain of human affairs (too) often misunderstood by orthodox economists as separate, autonomous, and “uprooted” from others. An inductive perspective on the economy challenges this assumption and unsettles economic theories that stem from it. This is precisely what Angé manages to do with her ethnography of cambio.

2 Cambio is a form of barter between lowland cultivators and highland herders. Angé spent five years researching this transaction by settling in the Cordillera of the province of Jujuy, adjacent to the Bolivian border, on the territory of the Kolla indigenous community, a group that had long been classified and racialized as “peasants” and “Indians,” but re-emerged politically as a specific people in the 1980s. However, the people she worked with “more spontaneously identify as members of collectives based on ecological specialization, rather than as Kolla people” (Angé 2022, p. 132). Intriguingly, the community generated (and regenerated) by cambio is not based on territorial and/or linguistic unity. Cambio, as Angé writes, “delineates a deterritorialised form of ethnicity in the sense that it is based not on a fixed area on the map but on the articulation between lowlands and highlands” (p. 163). Regarding
language, Spanish is used by the participants of cambio, even if “most Bolivian cultivators natively speak Quechua” (ibid.). Cambio itself is indeed a Spanish word.

3 Cambio more specifically takes place at fairs of the Argentinian Andes in the wider context of Catholic religious festivities—also known as fiestas (celebrations) or ferias (fairs). These festive events are devoted to Catholic figures through an array of activities, including dancing and sporting competitions in addition to religious rituals. On these occasions, foods from what one might call the Andean “terroir” are also exchanged by populations who meet to celebrate important religious moments, and carry out ritualized economic transactions necessary to the perpetuation of a certain way of life. This ethnography thus gives a concrete example of how utilitarian endeavors can be interlaced with ceremonial and spiritual ones, adding yet further ethnographic evidence to show that economic affairs are not self-contained or neutral.

4 By delving into the intricate workings of the cambio, Angé also questions classic anthropological theories. Barter and social regeneration in the Argentinian Andes could be read as an extensive attempt to define the concept of barter, which has been at the heart of many structuring “economic tales”—the reader will have in mind Graeber’s now almost classic debunking of the barter myth (2011)—while also remaining a blind spot in anthropological theories. Neither a gift nor a commodity exchange—concepts that have both been extensively explored in anthropology—barter has its own specificities that have been glossed over by anthropologists. In the conclusion of her book, Angé settles on a definition of the concept of barter: “barter is the direct exchange of use value with no reference to a third object. The importance of use distinguishes it from the gift, while the non-monetary regime of value distinguishes it from commodity exchange” (p. 194). She therefore restores a more complex and layered picture of economic life by establishing such a definition, which will hopefully inspire more work on the topic.

5 More profoundly, this book is an exploration of the array of values generated by a seemingly innocuous economic transaction between cultivators and herders in the remoteness of the Andean Cordillera. Without plunging into too much complexity (Angé’s book does that very well), here are some of the most important ones. As mentioned, by bartering highland meat with lowland maize, cambio has an instrumental value that is unapologetically performed by peasants. In other words, the exchange is not just symbolic: people actually come for the food. But they also come for other reasons, and this is why cambio deserves such an in-depth and systematic study. Cambio, like many forms of extra-market economic exchanges, produces social value: people mingle and rich social ties emerge from a utilitarian encounter. But cambio gives rise not only to complicity and friendship, but also to kinship. Through the exchange of traditional foods stemming from Andean ecological “niches,” cambio is a way to perpetuate kin alliances symbolically fed by certain ancient dietary habits. Through cambio, an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) of the Andean mountains is thus reunited and perpetuated. Furthermore, cambio has a “religious” or “cosmological” value, because the “success” of the transactions creates feelings of merriment, making the overall fiesta—in which cambio is embedded—more triumphant still. This vast array of values produced by cambio explains why this transaction has the power to regenerate the community that performs it; it is anything, in that sense, but an asocial transaction solely motivated by self-interest.
It would be wrong, however, to see *Barter and social regeneration in the Argentinian Andes* solely as a work of economic anthropology. This would simply contradict the “anthropological call” to de-compartmentalize economic matters. Angé’s book, at the center of which lies a careful description of exchanges between peasants of the Andes, weaves together an array of different themes, stories, and images, couched in a dynamic and integrative way. The reader becomes transversally acquainted with a complex lifeworld. For instance, there are intricate descriptions of the workings of an Andean pastoral lifeworld in its affective, moral, and economic dimensions, including a fascinating snippet on the relationships of shepherds with their animals. Reflections on people’s diets, and local standards of beauty, in the light of the wider discussion on *cambio*, add thickness to the book, while “fleshy” descriptions of the market stalls, replete with colorful potatoes, flamboyant characters, and myriads of corn hold the reader’s attention with their vivacity. It is also this very “fleshiness” that might cause the reader to feel lost in Angé’s dense text, with them sometimes losing sight of the *cambio* itself within chapters that carry the reader way beyond it, to understand it more deeply in turn. But the *cambio*, an extraordinarily rich ethnographic object, does end up coming back, after having let so many stories spill in its wake, to regenerate anthropological and economic theory.

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