

*FINAL DRAFT of paper published in Social Identities 2007, volume 13, issue 1, pages 125-133.*

## **Review Article: Performing the Market**

Gerda Roelvink

*Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*, Julia Elyachar, 2005, Durham: Duke University Press

### **Introduction**

At a time when neoliberalism, globalisation and capitalism dominate the political and intellectual landscape, the centrality of ‘the market’ is unquestioned. Julia Elyachar’s superb book, *Markets of Dispossession*, has been published at a propitious moment when academic and policy interest in the market is at an all-time high. Left critiques of neoliberalism, such as that offered by David Harvey at the 2006 Association of American Geographers meeting in Chicago, represent the market at the centre of capitalist expansion and the resolution of capitalism’s crisis of over accumulation. While holding onto the possibility of progressive outcomes, Harvey (2003) is primarily critical of the way marketisation brutally dispossesses groups of people. Elyachar’s *Markets of Dispossession* has been heralded by Harvey as a potent example of dispossession through neoliberal market intervention. Curiously, *Markets of Dispossession* has also been included in the very different research community enrolled by Michel Callon and his colleagues which is actually epistemologically opposed to the critical documenting, and thereby consolidating, of neoliberalism. In particular, Elyachar’s research is cited by Callon and Koray Caliskan (2005) as exemplary of new research showing how the enactment of actor networks we call ‘markets’ produce particular subjects and agencies.

How is it that Elyachar's *Markets of Dispossession* is able to contribute both to critical Marxist research documenting and analysing neoliberalism and also to a post-structural performative approach to market networks? I attempt to answer this question by investigating two narratives that are interwoven throughout this intriguing book – ‘the market of dispossession’ and ‘markets of diverse possessions’. I conclude by drawing attention to the political stakes involved in choosing which stories to perform through research practices.

### **Market 1: The Market of Dispossession**

El-Hirafiyeen was a place marked by sounds and silences. The silences came mainly from ‘youth graduate microenterprises’, which had been established with loans provided by the Social Fund for Development, established by the World Bank. By the time I started working there in 1994, many of those microenterprises were closed down. Those that were open were relatively quiet places of work. (Elyachar, 2005, p.39)

*Markets of Dispossession* is based on Elyachar's doctoral research in Cairo, Egypt, between 1993 and 1996. It bears little resemblance to the usual doctoral dissertation, seamlessly blending theoretical analysis and ethnographic material with little academic jargon. Elyachar's research explores markets in one particular setting – the neighbourhood of el-Hirafiyeen. El-Hirafiyeen is of particular interest because it was purposely built as a market-place to house and support both relocated ‘traditional’ workshops and new micro-enterprises funded by the World Bank, described in the quote above. While small enterprises represent a large part of Egypt's economy there is substantial diversity within this sector. Elyachar thus distinguishes between the workshops run by master craftsmen, which account for most small enterprises, and micro-enterprises established through development loans and run by “micro-entrepreneurs”. *Markets of Dispossession* traces the practices that constitute these two markets, with particular interest in the many actors that come together in this site, including the World Bank, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the masters of workshops.

‘The market of dispossession’ is a story about shifting regimes of neoliberalism in Cairo in which the market continues to be represented as *the* central mechanism of economic

development and social progress. *Markets of Dispossession* shows how, in the name of poverty reduction and improved wellbeing, the World Bank through its Social Fund and other international, national and local actors has enrolled what was once seen as the informal economy and social networks of the poor into the market. Thus, small enterprises in the informal economy are now viewed by development professionals as sites where cultural and social value can be transformed and extracted by entrepreneurial individuals, in turn generating economic growth (p.9; 189). In the scheme that Elyachar studies, 'youth' in Cairo gain funds through NGOs for market-oriented microenterprises. The idea is that they will become entrepreneurial individuals who, by following their own interests, will create a society of plenty and stability.

In this vision the market, despite its socially orientated and ethical appearance, remains the abstract mechanism or 'invisible hand' of neoliberalism. Thus a contradiction emerges: the market is viewed as both an abstract mechanism of capitalist development and a site of possible entrepreneurial intervention. This resonates with J.K. Gibson-Graham's (1996) work showing that 'the economy' has been constituted as both a site open to technical intervention and knowledge, and a closed essentialised realm that constrains action. Elyachar traces the idea of the abstract market to Adam Smith's legacy in political economy and the political economic thought employed by intergovernmental organisations to justify contemporary neoliberal political economic orientations.

The market is of course not simply a mechanism of economic development. As a governmentality, the neoliberal market is seen to have transcended the economy to become the central political mechanism of organising social life, engendering particular subjects and territories of governance (Rose, 1999). Elyachar argues, for example, that ideas linking individual freedom with markets have constructed them as a means of political development according to the standard of Western democracy. Indeed, development agencies see markets as vehicles for political empowerment based on entrepreneurs pursuing their individual interests. Responsibility for poverty is shifted from development agencies to poor individuals and communities themselves where, as Elyachar notes, these actors come to claim ownership not simply of their own poverty but of increasing debt. As a technology of neoliberal governance and resource extraction, 'empowerment debt' is a means by which the

excluded poor are to be 'included', or more accurately subjected, into wider political economic systems and constituted as self-governing subjects.

Contributing to new directions in Foucaudian governmentality studies, *Markets of Dispossession* moves beyond descriptions of governmental rationalities, like microenterprise and social capital, to the subjects and practices that they seek to install. For Elyachar, however, these practices are situated within a powerful larger narrative, that of capitalist development as expounded by Karl Marx and, more recently, David Harvey. Those familiar with Harvey's book, *The New Imperialism* (2003), will recognise his influence in the title, *Markets of Dispossession*, which directly refers to Harvey's chapter on accumulation by dispossession. Here he returns to the analysis of primitive accumulation, the forceful dispossession of people from their land as a pre-condition and continual accompaniment to capitalist development. Current acts of dispossession resolve the crisis of over accumulation by opening up new or expanding old markets through commodification and privatisation.

Elyachar draws on Annette Weiner's (1992) work on the commodification of the commons to emphasise that primitive accumulation is a process of political-economic *and* cultural dispossession. Building on this conceptualisation, she reveals micro-enterprise interventions as a contemporary form of dispossession. Ironically then, Cairo is being dispossessed of the very informal market networks that such interventions aim to harness for development. As Elyachar describes it, by transforming existing social networks into realms of individual pursuit, attempts to implement this neoliberal version of the market threaten the very characteristics required for all market performances in the first place, namely the social networks rendered through the discourse of social capital. In fact, in her description of the practices through which such dispossession is carried out, micro-enterprise markets were doomed from the start, having none of the characteristics through which markets in Cairo have been performed historically. Additionally, Elyachar argues, such interventions have led to the characteristics they were supposed to eliminate, such as corruption. As NGOs' realised the fantasy of the abstract market, they learned that "Market success came from trickery and a clear-eyed focus on short-term gain. They should take for themselves what they could, while they could, for if they did not then someone else would do so instead" (p.211). Thus, Elyachar argues that through the neoliberal market and empowerment debt,

diverse existing markets that are highly social, cultural and moral have become sources of capital accumulation within a global capitalist system.

Elyachar pushes this analysis beyond what she sees as Harvey's restricted focus on the state as the vehicle of dispossession to a range of agents of dispossession involved in markets, especially international organisations and NGOs. Thus, Elyachar is suspicious of research positing NGOs as part of "grassroots globalisation" or "globalization from below" in which democratic social mobilisation and alternative knowledge is generated from diverse localities (Appadurai, 2000, p.3). Against this argument, she writes that "NGOs need to be analyzed as part of – rather than something lying outside – the dominant model of political economy in the world today" (p.169). Hence, in contrast to representations of NGOs as clueless radicals, ineffectual humanitarians or sources of progressive transformation, NGOs are shown to be vital in the enrolment of the poor into the process of dispossession, channelling the funds, technologies and concepts supporting the micro-enterprises and their markets.

Through such agents of dispossession social networks of the poor and what was once described as the informal economy have been enrolled into "*the economy*". Elyachar's story shows that neoliberal micro-enterprise schemes have largely failed in creating markets. As the quote which begins this section shows, these markets are silent hollow shells. The neoliberal intervention therefore misses the mark; it cannot enact a functioning market. What is also interesting is that the neoliberal market has not led to the dispossession of all markets in el-Hirafiyeen, there remain markets made up of craftsmen.

## **Market 2: Markets of Diverse Possessions**

The dominant sounds and sights emanated from the workshops of the craftsmen who had been evicted from other locations in northern Cairo. Some of these had closed down as well, or sold out to new owners who sometimes had no previous experience in the trade. Those who had survived their move into el-Hirafiyeen and reconstructed their markets and businesses were busy working inside the workshop or outside on the adjoining street. (Elyachar, 2005, p.39)

*Markets of Dispossession* gives a strong sense of the long history of markets in Egypt, showing that markets shifted with changes in the local and global political economy and demonstrating their strong resilience and ability to evolve. For instance, the privileged position of foreigners in the economy, traced to the 1740 extension of existing “arrangements” between Western powers and the Ottoman Porte, had generated growing resentment by the twentieth century and local markets were situated as a realm of “cultural practice” to resist “foreign occupation” (p.12). Later in the book workshop networks themselves are shown to shift with national political economic changes like when foreign employers left Egypt under the nationalism of Abdel-Nasser, opening up workshops to Egyptian apprentices.

As the quote above suggests, *Markets of Dispossession* focuses on the practices through which longstanding markets are enacted in the contemporary Cairo neighbourhood of el-Hirafiyeen. Elyachar’s lens to the workshops’ market practices and networks is the craftsman who is master of his workshop, his trade or both; workshops and masters go hand in hand. The individual master embodies the network through which his mastery is constituted – the community that supports the workshop’s market and the ‘good will’ gone into building and maintaining this community. *Markets of Dispossession* shows that markets are crafted through relational networks that are at once economic, social, cultural and moral. A wonderfully rich Chapter Four, “Masters, Power and Model Workshop Markets”, describes different masters’ market performances and shifting power relations. We learn about Ibrahim who as master of his trade and his workshop is “a master in all senses of the word” (p.103), and Mohammed who, though master of his trade, has the status of an apprentice because he does not own his workshop. Elyachar shows how trades, workshops and markets co-constitute one another:

This market was a form of embodied practice. It was not the market as the abstract meeting point between supply and demand. When the market showed its wisdom, it was through the action of networks of people. The failures of the graduates and microenterprises, for example, were usually traced by craftsmen and others to their lack of ‘a market’. (p.124)

Through the analysis of these workshop markets Elyachar joins broader conversations about the forms of value produced in the diverse networks that constitute the economy. In the

tradition of Marxist analysis, economic value is often discussed in terms of surplus value, referring to the creation of “unpaid value”, specifically what is left over from market orientated production after that which is necessary to reproduce labour is taken out (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, pp.115-116.). Gibson-Graham’s (2006) recent work on community economies extends this understanding of surplus to social surplus which is produced from the combination of many diverse economic enterprises. For Gibson-Graham the distribution of social surplus lies at the heart of ethical decisions which give rise to community economies. Elyachar’s contribution to this body of work is the concept of “relational value” – “the positive value attached to the creation, reproduction, and extension of relationships in workshop life” (p.143). *Markets of Dispossession* emphasises that relational value is not a pre-existing resource or asset like social capital to be tapped into by the likes of the World Bank, but rather a relational flow performed under certain circumstances through networks. This representation is similar to that of Gibson-Graham’s community economy, in which both forms of value, social surplus and relational value, give rise to an ethical or moral network/community.

Elyachar demonstrates relational value through her discussion of the “value of generosity”, which refers to the value performed when someone cares for the community and displays moral integrity when interacting with neighbours. Economic and social interactions blend in such interactions. Placing relational value and the principle of generosity firmly inside the market, Elyachar shows that in following this principle, “Masters pursue their economic interests openly and with full social legitimacy” (p.140). Thus, markets are overdetermined in the sense that economic and non-economic social aspects are interdependent (Resnick and Wolff, 1987). Markets are also overdetermined by diverse economic practices, including market and non-market forms of exchange. For me, this book’s strength lies here. In contrast to microenterprises of youth entrepreneurs, the workshops’ market practices do not only involve market exchange but also gifting and non-profit activities that create and maintain market networks. As Elyachar notes, “Informants told many stories about buyers-in who did not understand this principle of valuing relationships over short term gain or vicious competition. They soon went out of business” (p.123).

Indeed, in el-Hirafiyeen, failure to value relationships has serious social and economic consequences. In contrast to positive relational value, Elyachar discusses interest, or more correctly “vested interest”, a negative value arising from practices through which individuals pursue personal interests without regard to the broader community which legitimates economic activity.

A master has to make his workshop go, since that is the source of his and his family’s survival and well-being. This is a legitimate form of interest. But such a legitimate pursuit of interests is quite different from the competition pursued by the agent of neoclassical economics. (p.148)

Moving away from capitalist dispossession, *Markets of Dispossession* shows how a different form of dispossession can arise from negative value produced in market performances. Elyachar reveals that pursuing vested interests attracts the ‘evil eye’, which targets the individual for bad times. These might include an unfortunate accident or a loss of market and possible separation from the community. In this discussion Elyachar shows how market intervention of the kind espoused by the World Bank interacts with existing relations and in particular with the evil eye that threatens the very market networks these schemes attempt to capture. The evil eye can thus operate positively as part of a counter-governmentality, protecting market networks from technologies of entrepreneurial subjectification which privilege individually-oriented economic behaviour. In this way *Markets of Dispossession* nicely opens up the different forms of value performed through market networks.

Elyachar’s discussion of value produced through markets draws directly on Adam Smith’s moral philosophy. In contrast to the myth of the ‘invisible hand’, she suggests that relational value corresponds to the ‘invisible spectator’ found in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith’s invisible spectator is a form of social consciousness with which we make moral judgements about our own and other’s actions, in turn ensuring an orderly market society (Watson, 2006). As Elyachar describes it:

this conscience embodies the eyes of one’s neighbours and community and is part of the formation of the self. He who ignores the internalized eye of the conscience, and pursues



short-term individual interest without constraint, invites the attack of another eye, the evil eye. (p.149)

Through the narrative of markets of diverse possessions Elyachar complicates simplistic readings of Smith and contributes to political economic research into the grounded moral and social nature of economic relations. She provides a useful story with which to debunk attempts by governance bodies like the World Bank to impose the market from above.

In this representation of markets of diverse possessions Elyachar has moved far from the market as solely a means of commodity exchange and capitalist development. Markets are now seen as central to the production of 'community' in a community economy, whose boundaries shift as positive and negative value are produced. Thus, practices of positive and negative value are diverse possessions constitutive of markets. For Elyachar, "there is no such thing as 'the market'" *per se*. Rather, markets are performed. The narrative of markets of diverse possessions thereby joins a new stream of intellectual inquiry, led by Callon, which explores the way in which markets are performed and thus constituted particularly by economic theory but also by social science research, policy and social movement activism. In contrast to the representation of the market as a totalised dominant Being to which we must bow down and a rational lawful realm that can be implemented as a "standard of civilization" (see Bowden and Seabrooke, 2006), in this body of work markets are understood as networks. Elyachar's work shows it makes sense to see markets as networks which enable various transactions to occur, bringing together actors and things and thereby constantly reconstituting relationships.

The discussion of value production through market performances prompts Elyachar to question the resilience of market networks as "neoliberal policies are enacted in Egypt" (p.166). "Will", she asks, "the incorporation of the social networks and cultural practices of the poor into the *market proper* regenerate the free market? Or will it cause that market to implode?" (p.166, emphasis added). *Markets of Dispossession* reveals a long history of existing and continually shifting market networks, suggesting that the lens of "accumulation by dispossession" and with it the idea of a "market proper" is somewhat more peripheral to this performance than Elyachar argues. Rather, just as Elyachar has done, research can reveal and

open up diverse existing market practices that reframe markets and market networks, including or excluding actors like ‘youth entrepreneurs’. As researchers we can join this performance, equipping actors in their market practices.

### **Conclusion: Performing the Market through Research**

Experimentation and knowledge production are part of market performances and a way to intervene in the hybrid networks that make and remake markets. There is a strong sense of Elyachar as researcher in the book and of her intervention in the very market networks she is researching. Elyachar draws attention to the ethnographical practice of gift exchange between her research team and the researched and the way this added to the diversity of exchange within the market networks under study. This is an important part of the performative approach outlined by Callon and Caliskan and I would have liked to see this side of things brought to the fore. The researcher can be seen as performing one of the many possessions in a market network just as research can be represented as part of the process of dispossession. This relates more broadly to the two approaches to markets performed by the book and in particular the backgrounding of ‘markets of diverse possessions’ and the foregrounding of ‘the market of dispossession’. Thus, while I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Markets of Dispossession* and found it immensely thought provoking, I cannot help but feel that the title is out of sync with what, for me, is one of the most important contributions of this book – the performance of existing market networks that are in fact full of diverse possessions.

*Gerda Roelvink is a PhD Scholar in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University. She may be contacted at [gerda.roelvink@anu.edu.au](mailto:gerda.roelvink@anu.edu.au)*

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Katherine Gibson, Julie Graham, Michelle Carnegie and Brett Bowden for their comments on earlier drafts.

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