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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **New perspectives on surplus production and inequality: surplus as relation, strategy and agency**

**Review by Martin Loeng**

*Surplus: The Politics of Production and the Strategies of Everyday Life*

by Christopher T. Morehart & Kristin De Lucia ed.

University Press of Colorado, 2015

*Surplus: The Politics of Production and the Strategies of Everyday Life* provides numerous contextualised accounts of different social forms of production, storage and allocation of surplus across the world. It provides a provocative and varied contribution to archaeology, anthropology and the social sciences (especially economics, economic analyses, Marxism, and economic anthropology) more generally. For those interested in engaging with surplus and economic strategies, as well as inequality and hierarchy's connections to economic processes, this should be an extremely valuable volume.

The central commitment of this volume is to complicate social evolutionary understandings of surplus. The introduction both sets the tone for the rest of the volume and engages with many theoretical presuppositions about the role of surplus (Marxian, dialectic, classic economic), mirroring the concern for empirical contextualisation of substantivists like Karl Polanyi and George Dalton. Several chapters focus on surplus production and distribution as social strategies that must be contextualised historically, socially and culturally. For example, Wells provides a provocative analysis of how modes of religiosity may have affected surplus production in sixteenth-century Mesoamerica. These chapters thus open the notion of surplus to multiple, contextualised and processual understandings.

T. L. Thurston (chapter 5) describes how surplus production among farmers in Småland, Sweden from years 1000 to 1600 was a part of multiple, changing strategies to preserve autonomy and ward off

attempts by the Vasa kingdom to establish political sovereignty. Flexibility in production strategies and usage of surplus contributed to the relative autonomy of the Småland area and thus provide an interesting account of how surplus can be employed in particular political, historical, social and economic contexts. Such strategies were not only a means of building inequality and hierarchy, but also a way to retain other social forms. In a similar way to other chapters in the book, this research opens up the question of what role surplus plays in the development of societies. It shifts the question from what role surplus plays as an analytical object, in *Grand Theories of Society* for instance, to one about how social forms of surplus are employed historically. In this way the volume explores a more action-oriented approach which could inform critical research on a wide variety of subjects. Perhaps the more exciting possibility in this perspective against social evolutionism is how ‘inequality’ and ‘hierarchy’ stop sounding inevitable.

There is a wealth of locations, historical periods, objects of interest, political systems and contexts discussed in the book, so much so, that it is impossible to summarise them all. The chapters employ diverse methodological strategies: some are ethnohistorical, others archaeological, some based in written records, others on oral accounts. Yet all share a common focus on action and everyday life, social and contextual dimensions of surplus, and a critical and empirical inspection of the transformative dimensions of surplus – thus confronting the substantivist critique on many arenas. The concluding chapter by Earle does a lot to contextualise the variety of studies in this volume, dividing them into the broader analytical categories “bottom-up” and “top-down” forms of surplus production. Surplus thus moves away from transformation as such, and explores how different forms of surplus (social, material) play a part in continuous processes of materialising social structures (p. 315). In other words, actions and everyday strategies centring on surplus are here understood as relational forms of agency that reproduce and change such social structures. To quote Miller (chapter 4), “...simply accumulating surplus goods or owed labor is insufficient to create hierarchical social relationships,” (p. 99). Rather, surplus must be spent and it is in research on this relation between production and spending that this edited volume provides many provocative suggestions.

On a more theoretical level, *Surplus* confronts the debate on relative or absolute surplus. The conclusion seems to argue for an in-between solution, being for a substantivist appreciation of social and historical context in defining what surplus is (housing, land, people, labour, crafted objects, food), while also retaining some form of analytical ‘surface’ above which surplus is placed theoretically (see

p. 18-24). While this compromise begs further theorising on how different scholars define surplus, this open definition allows this edited volume to illustrate differently functioning systems. For example, Bolender (Chapter 6) traces the appearance of rent obligations, tenancy relations between bigger and smaller farms in Viking age Iceland that relied on surplus from land, rather than the previous surplus of land. He explores in detail how the emerging top-down system of surplus extraction, enshrined in property rights, altered the everyday contexts of action and political action through the concentration of land ownership. On the other side, De Lucia and Morehart (chapter 3) explore the changing economic strategies for pooling surpluses and diversifying livelihoods at the household level against possible economic failure in the context of pre-Aztec central Mexico. Their focus is on the mixture of top-down demands from an imperial Aztec state, and bottom-up changes in decisions on forms of production on the household level. The open definition of what surplus is allows this book to present us with provocative comparisons, and hopefully further theoretical engagement.

The greatest value that *Surplus* provides is that it expands your imagination when it comes to economic strategies ‘beyond subsistence.’ For many, this volume will open up a new space of analytical foci in research related to economy. As Norman (chapter 8) shows in his example on *Palace Politics in the Bight of West Benin*, the social connections (wealth in people) and control of external trade through which elite statuses were achieved, manifested in palatial houses, also demanded feasts and social occasions of ritualised generosity. This kind of festive allocation of surplus goods acquired by elites from external trade relations could actually both have been the source of elite authority, as well as its downfall. Surplus can cause changes in multiple directions (p. 215-216). Thompson and Moore (chapter 10) explore how predictable and anticipated surplus (such as seasonal harvests) grant hunter-gatherers in Coastal Georgia different contexts for action and inform the making of longer-term social relationships. Thus, the agency and sociality of surplus is also contingent on its rhythms.

This edited volume is a thoroughly researched, broadly appealing exploration into many aspects of surplus. It provides theoretical as well as methodological chapters. It will appeal to archaeologists as much as economists, anthropologists and other social scientists. For anyone with an interesting in economy, politics or society at all, this is a valuable contribution. For the activist it might even be considered an exercise in developing an appreciation of how complex societal histories can be. The intended audience is perhaps academic due to the methodological parts and complex language. But, after the introductory and concluding chapter, most readers should be well prepared to understand most

chapters and their impact. I therefore recommend this volume to everyone with an interest in the above subjects, and encourage the exploration of the different chapters, regions, methods and theoretical concepts.

***Martin Loeng*** is a Ph.D. fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway. He is currently undertaking research, through an interactional and affective approach, on urban informal livelihood strategies in Tanzania and their connection to relation-building and morality in the tourism industry.



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