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Unraveling the Meanings of Underground Work

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Abstract Across the social sciences, the dominant “thin” reading of monetary exchange that views it as universally market-like and motivated by monetary gain is being challenged by a “thicker” reading that seeks to unpack the complex and messy characters and logics of monetised transactions. Until now, this re-reading has occurred by studying small alternative economic spaces (e.g., car boot sales, local currency schemes) that can be easily explained away as peripheral or even superfluous to an understanding of mainstream monetised exchange. To provide a more forceful challenge, therefore, this paper interrogates a form of work often seen as an exemplar of market-like work undertaken for the purpose of monetary gain, namely the underground sector. Reporting empirical evidence that unravels the heterogeneous and embedded characters and logics underpinning this work, this paper calls for those promulgating a thicker reading to be bolder and interrogate the meanings of monetary transactions in more mainstream spaces.

Keywords: hidden economy, informal sector, gift-giving, cultural turn, Nottinghamshire

INTRODUCTION

The narrative that the only type of monetary exchange is that which is market-like and motivated by monetary gain runs wide and deep in economic discourse and is imbued in economic perspectives ranging from the neo-classical to the Marxian variety (e.g., Ciscel and Heath 2001; Harvey 1989; Sayer 1997). As Jessop (2002) puts it, the reason for the persistence of this crude normative reading is because it serves the interests of not only the neo-liberals who adopt a positive view that this must be met with open arms but also the radical theorists who believe that it requires fierce resistance. Such a view of monetised exchange in economic discourse has been

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reinforced, moreover, by a “formalist” tradition in anthropological enquiry that has viewed exchange mechanisms in contemporary societies as less “embedded” than those in pre-industrial societies. From this perspective, the idea is that there has been a separation of the “economy” from “culture”, resulting in exchanges in western societies being “thinner”, less loaded with social meaning and less symbolic than traditional exchanges (see Mauss 1966).

In recent years, however, this reading of monetary exchange has started to be put under the spotlight, not least by an array of analysts influenced by the cultural turn in social scientific enquiry who have begun to contest not only the economic determinism of much previous enquiry but also the meaning of “the economic” itself (e.g., Carruthers and Babb 2000; Crang 1996; Crewe and Gregson 1998; Lee 2000; Zelizer 1994). For these analysts, the notion that monetised exchange can always be understood as conducted under market-like relations for the purpose of monetary gain has been subject to critical scrutiny (e.g., Gibson-Graham 1996; Carrier 1997; Crang 1997; Byrne *et al.* 1998; Crewe and Gregson 1998; Crewe 2000; Lee 2000; Kovel 2002; Gibson-Graham and Ruccio 2001). As Crewe and Gregson (1998: 41) argue, “the major defect of such market-based models of exchange is simply that they do not convey the richness and messiness of the exchange experience” in the advanced economies. Drawing inspiration from the earlier work of Polanyi (1944), the formalist anthropology approach and economic discourses that adopt a ‘thin’ understanding of monetary exchange have begun to be contested from a “substantivist” anthropological position and institutional economics approach that adopts a ‘thicker’ understanding of monetary exchange in which transactions are viewed in terms of social norms and values and as being socially, culturally and geographically embedded (Davis 1992; Zelizer 1994; Crang 1996; Lee 1996, 2000; Crewe and Gregson 1998; Bourdieu 2001; Community Economies Collective 2001; Slater and Tonkiss 2001; Comelieua 2002).

Until now, however, many of the studies providing such “thicker” descriptions of monetary exchange have focused upon what Leyshon *et al* (2003) term “alternative economic spaces”. They have investigated the complex and messy nature of monetised exchange in a variety of small or marginal spaces existing on the outer edges of the mainstream economy, such as car boot sales (Crewe and Gregson 1998), nearly new sales and classified advertisements (Clarke 1998, 2000), second-hand and informal retail channels (Williams and Paddock 2003), inflation-free local currency experiments such as Local Exchange and Trading Schemes (Lee 1996;

Williams 1996; North 1999), sweat-equity currencies such as time dollars (e.g., Boyle 1999; Cahn 2000; Seyfang and Smith 2002), gift-giving (Thrift and Olds 1996) and small horticultural nurseries (Lee 2000). This has allowed their findings to be all too easily explained away as peripheral to an understanding of “mainstream” monetised exchange. It has been relatively simple for such findings to be ignored as studies of the trivial, marginal and superfluous. Whether it is correct or not to do so is not the important point. The key issue is that it is easy to see why these studies have failed to provide any significant or effective challenge to the hegemonic ideology that views monetary gain to always underpin monetised transactions and therefore, such exchange to be part of the model of rational self-interest.

To more forcefully and effectively challenge this reading, therefore, the aim of this paper is to unravel the meaning of monetary exchange in a larger economic sphere constituting somewhere between 7–16 per cent of GDP (European Commission 1998), which is widely and popularly viewed as exemplifying the pursuit of rational self-interest, namely the underground economy. If monetised exchange in this economic sphere can be shown to be sometimes other than market-like work conducted for monetary gain, then perhaps some significant progress can start to be made towards facilitating a wider questioning of the currently dominant thin reading of monetary transactions. The difference between this study, which focuses upon the underground sector, and the previous studies of alternative economic spaces, therefore, is that it investigates a sphere that is commonly assumed to epitomize the pursuit of rational self-interest rather than realms that are from the outset often seen as in some sense “impure” in this regard.

Firstly, therefore, this paper will review the literature on the underground economy to show how a reading of such work as market-like and motivated by monetary gain widely prevails. Reporting evidence from a study of the nature of underground work in the English locality of Bassetlaw conducted in late 2002, an alternative reading of underground work is then provided that is more appreciative of the heterogeneous economic relations and motivations involved and its variable embedded meanings. The implication, therefore, is that if this sphere that is often seen to epitomize exchange conducted for monetary gain can be unraveled to display its multiple meanings, then there is every reason for those who wish to promulgate a thicker reading of monetised exchange to be bolder than has so far been the case in terms of the spaces that they investigate.

READING THE UNDERGROUND ECONOMY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the vast literature on the “underground economy”, or what is sometimes known as “informal employment”, “cash-in-hand work” or the “hidden economy”, the strong consensus is that this work is monetised exchange that is unregistered by, or hidden from, the state for tax and/or welfare purposes but which is legal in all other respects (Thomas 1992; Portes 1994; European Commission 1998; Williams and Windebank 1998; Feige 1999).

Until now, the assumption in the vast body of literature on underground work is that such monetised transactions are near enough universally imbued with rational self-interest. The assumption is that both suppliers and employers of this labor engage in such work under market-like relations for the purpose of monetary gain. This assumption prevails wherever the underground economy is studied in the world (e.g., Castells and Portes 1989; De Soto 1989; International Labour Office 2002) and whether the analysts write from a neo-liberal perspective, viewing such work as a form of self-employment that people pursue as rational economic actors confronted by rules and regulations that are inherently unfair (De Soto 1989; Sauvy 1984), or a political economy perspective viewing it as a form of exploitative employment that a weak and unprotected workforce is obliged to undertake for unscrupulous employers (e.g., Castells and Portes 1989; Portes 1994; Sassen 1997).

Such a reading is also prevalent whether such work is seen as in long-term terminal decline or one views economic globalization (a dangerous cocktail of de-regulation and increasing global competition) as causing its emergence and growth as a new facet of contemporary capitalism (e.g., Castells and Portes 1989; Sassen 1997; International Labour Office 2002), especially in global cities and amongst immigrant/ethnic minority populations (e.g., Sassen 1997).

This discourse also applies whether it is economists studying the magnitude of underground work such as its cross-national variations (e.g., Dallago 1991; European Commission 1998; Feige 1999; Friedman *et al* 2000; Schneider 2001; International Labour Office 2002) or sociologists and geographers examining its social and/or spatial variations (e.g., Renooy 1990; Jensen *et al.* 1995; Williams and Windebank 1998). It also pertains both amongst those who blindly accept the tenets of the “marginality thesis” which views such work to be conducted by marginalised populations (e.g., Button 1984; Castells and Portes 1989; Blair and Endres 1994; Portes 1994;

Kesteloot and Meert 1999) and those who recognize that it is more concentrated in affluent areas (e.g., Pahl 1984; Van Geuns *et al* 1987; Renooy 1990; Mingione 1991; Mingione and Morlicchio 1993; Jensen *et al.* 1995; Fortin *et al.* 1996; Williams and Windebank 1998).

This ‘thin’ reading of the underground sector as market-like work conducted for monetary gain even predominates when multiple types of underground work have been recognized ranging from its “organized” forms, where such work is conducted under an employee/employer relationship for formal or informal businesses, to its “autonomous” form where it is conducted on a self-employed basis (e.g., Pahl 1984; Renooy 1990; Leonard 1994, 1998; MacDonald 1994; Jensen *et al.* 1995; Fortin *et al.* 1996; Williams and Windebank 1998). Even if underground work is no longer viewed as an exploitative form of low-paid employment sitting at the bottom of a hierarchy of types of formal employment, but a heterogeneous labor market with a hierarchy of its own, all such work remains widely viewed as pursued for the purpose of monetary gain.

More pertinently, such a reading also prevails whether studies consider either the suppliers’ and/or employers’ rationales. Underground workers, whether of the low-paid exploited or well-paid autonomous worker variety, are widely thought of as engaged in such work primarily to make money, and employers of underground workers in order to save money and/or to make profit. Whether this is indeed the case, however, has not been empirically validated in any study so far conducted. It is simply assumed. As Travers (2002: 2) puts it, “most research on [underground work] gives short shrift to the motivations of people to do this work. It is usually said that people do the work to earn extra money and left at that”. Here, in consequence, and drawing inspiration from the above analyses that are unpacking monetised exchange and providing thicker descriptions, the intention is to subject this dominant view of underground work to critical scrutiny.

RE-READING UNDERGROUND WORK: SOME EVIDENCE FROM ENGLAND

In late 2002, research was conducted in the North Nottinghamshire area of Bassetlaw in the United Kingdom to investigate the nature of the underground economy. As a local government area, there is very little reason to believe that the character of the underground economy identified here will be starkly different to elsewhere in either the UK or the advanced economies more generally. It is an area that lies very much in the middle of the UK table that ranks local government areas in terms of their level of

multiple deprivation (DLTR 2000), a variable that has been widely shown to have some impact on the character of underground work (e.g., Pahl 1984; Renooy 1990; Leonard 1994; Jensen *et al* 1995; Williams and Windebank 1998; Kesteloot and Meert 1999). Indeed, the only real distinguishing feature of this area is that it is the original home of the Pilgrim fathers who set sail for the Newfoundland of America in 1620. Situated between the coalfields of Derbyshire, agricultural Lincolnshire and industrial South Yorkshire, this is a standard English locality with a population of some 105,700 who are concentrated in the towns of Worksop and Retford. So long as a range of affluent and deprived neighborhoods are studied in this district, therefore, there is no reason to believe that the findings will be at odds with those likely to be found elsewhere in the UK or the advanced economies more generally.

Given this, three wards with contrasting levels of multiple deprivation were selected using the 2000 Index of Multiple Deprivation (DLTR 2000) that ranks all wards in the country. One of the most affluent wards within the locality was thus selected (i.e., Blyth ranked 6,070 out of 8,414 wards nationally), the middle-ranking ward (i.e., East Retford West ranked 2,451) and one of the wards displaying the highest levels of multiple deprivation in Bassetlaw (i.e., Worksop South East ranked the 122nd most deprived ward in the UK).

To ensure that the data collected within each ward were representative of the ward, a spatially stratified sampling method was used (Kitchin and Tate 2001). Every n th dwelling was targeted, depending on the number of households in the ward, in order to generate 40 interviews in each locality (120 in total). If there was no response, then after one call back, the n th + 1 dwelling was surveyed and failing this, the n th - 1, n th + 2 and so forth until an interview was completed.

Given the sensitive nature of the data being collected, and despite the one-off success of mail-shot questionnaires in Canada (Fortin *et al.* 1996), a decision was taken to use face-to-face interviews. A pilot study using unstructured face-to-face interviews, nevertheless, identified that interviewees found it difficult to recall where underground work had been both used and supplied. As a result, a relatively structured interview method was devised centered around a list of 42 common tasks, derived from the seminal study of household work practices by Pahl (1984) on the Isle of Sheppey.¹

¹ The 42 tasks examined covered house maintenance (outdoor painting; indoor painting; wallpapering; plastering; mending a broken window and maintenance of appliances; walling/fencing), home improvement (putting in double glazing; plumbing; electrical work; house insulation; putting in a bathroom suite; building

To identify instances where households used underground work to get these tasks completed, the sources of labor employed to carry out each of the 42 tasks were investigated. The interviewee was asked whether each activity had been undertaken in the household during the previous five years/year/month/week (depending on the activity). If it had, they were asked: who had conducted the task (a household member, a relative living outside the household, a friend, neighbor, firm, landlord, etc); whether the person had been paid or not; and if paid, whether it was “cash-in-hand” or not as well as how much they had been given. They were then asked why they had decided to get the work done using that source of labor so as to enable their motives to be understood, as well as what alternative source of labor they would have used if they had not been able to use that labor to undertake the task.

Following this, the supply of underground work by household members was examined. The interviewee was asked whether a household member had conducted each task for another household and, if so, who had done it, for whom, whether they had received money, how much they had received and why they had decided to do the task. To capture other underground work received and supplied outside of these 42 tasks, meanwhile, a series of open-ended questions was used, especially regarding underground work conducted for firms (rather than other households) and why they had decided to use or supply such work. Below, the results are reported. To do this, firstly, the character of such work is investigated and secondly, the motives of both employers and suppliers of such labor.

The Embeddedness of Underground Work

Until now, and as detailed above, a ‘thin’ reading of underground work as market-like and motivated by monetary gain has tended to be simply accepted without question. The first clue that this might not be always applicable lies in an examination of the nature of the relationship between employers and suppliers. The conventional depiction of underground work is that it is conducted under work relations akin to formal employment. In this view, an “employee” is employed by an “employer” in order to undertake a

an extension; converting an attic; putting in central heating and odd DIY jobs), housework (routine housework; cleaning windows outdoors; spring cleaning; cleaning windows indoors; doing the shopping; washing/ironing clothes; cooking meals; washing dishes; hairdressing; household administration), making and repairing goods (clothes; curtains; tools, furniture), car maintenance (washing car; repairing car and car maintenance), gardening (care of indoor plants; outdoor borders; outdoor vegetables; lawn mowing; tidying garden) and caring activities (daytime baby-sitting; night-time baby sitting; tutoring; pet care).

task under market-like relations. Examining the relationship between the employers and suppliers, however, raises doubts about this reading of underground work as always market-like in character. As Table 1 reveals, although just over two-thirds (67.8 per cent) of underground work was conducted by firms or somebody self-employed that the household did not previously know, the remaining one-third was conducted by people previously known to the household. People defined as friends undertook 18.9 per cent of all underground work, 11.6 per cent was undertaken by kin and 1.2 per cent by neighbors.

There were moreover, some significant variations between the populations studied in terms of the social relations involved in underground work. In the affluent ward, some 82.7 per cent of underground work was undertaken by people previously unknown to the household, whilst in the middle-ranking and deprived ward, this figure was much lower at 58.2 per cent and 55.3 per cent respectively. In these latter wards therefore, underground work was more likely to be conducted by kin, friends and neighbors than in the affluent ward.

Is it the case, therefore, that self-interest and monetary gain has penetrated so deeply in contemporary English society that it prevails even when money changes hands between friends, neighbors and kin? Or do different motives prevail when such work is conducted? To answer this, the motives of both employers and suppliers need to be investigated.

Rationales of Employers and Suppliers

It is normally assumed that employers use underground labor in order to save/make money. However, Table 2 displays that this is not always the case. This notion of saving/making money is the primary motive in just 59 per cent of instances where underground work was used and, in nearly every case, it was either firms and/or self-employed people previously unknown to the employer who were conducting this work. There is thus a strong correlation between the desire to get jobs done cheaper than would be the case if somebody were formally employed and the use of unknown firms and people to do the underground work. When there is social distance between the purchaser and supplier, therefore, it appears that monetary gain prevails in purchasers' rationales. Indeed, the finding that 78.7 per cent of underground purchases in affluent Blyth were made in order to save money compared with just 21.3 per cent in deprived Workson South-East is largely explained by the greater preponderance in the deprived area to use closer social relations to do the work.

Table 1: Sources of Underground Work

Area	% of all underground work conducted by:				
	Kin	Friend	Neighbor	Self-employed person previously unknown	Firm or business
All Areas	11.6	18.9	1.2	67.8	0.6
Affluent ward	0	17.3	0	82.7	0
Middle ward	21.4	16.7	4.8	54.8	2.4
Deprived ward	21.3	23.4	0	55.3	0

Table 2: Primary rationales for employing underground workers

	Economic rationales	Redistributive rationales	Social rationales	Other
All areas	59.0	16.9	6.6	17.5
Deprived ward	21.3	38.3	14.9	25.5
Middle ward	65.9	15.9	9.1	9.1
Affluent	78.7	4.0	0	17.3

Even in those cases where monetary gain was the primary motive of employers, however, qualifications were often attached such as “but they also needed the work”, “but I would have done it myself if I had not employed them” or “but they are a good friend”. Indeed, if these instances where qualifications were attached to the rationale of saving/making money are extracted, then this rationale of making/saving money prevails in just 30 per cent of all instances of underground work.

Turning to the motives of the undeclared workers, it is similarly the case that they are often assumed to engage in such activity to make money. In only 60 per cent of cases, however, was the suppliers’ primary rationale one of monetary gain. Indeed, even when monetary gain was given as the principal reason for undertaking underground work, it was again in 34 per cent of all such cases qualified with other statements, especially when this work was conducted for friends, kin, neighbors or other household members. For example, although making money was often given as the principal reason, this was commonly qualified by statements such as “I also did it as a friend”, “I was also helping them out” and “they wouldn’t have been able to get it done any other way”.

Nevertheless, in nearly all cases where they worked for firms “on the side” (3 per cent of all underground work), monetary gain was the sole motive, as it was when engaging in self-employed activity for people they do not know well (55 per cent of all such work), although qualifications were more common in such instances. However, making money was not the primary motive when doing work for closer social relations, which covers 42 per cent of the underground work supplied.

Turning to employers’ and suppliers’ primary rationales when closer social relations are involved, therefore, some very different motivations emerge that suggest that monetised exchange in the underground economy

cannot be fully understood in “thin” terms as market-like work motivated by monetary gain. As will now be shown, other motives prevail when employers and suppliers conduct underground work for closer social relations, displaying the need for a thicker description of the messy and complex relations and motives involved in such exchange. Grouping together the diverse reasons given for conducting underground work other than monetary gain, two predominant motives can be identified. These are “community-building” and “redistribution”, each of which is now discussed in turn.

When “community-building” rationales predominated amongst employers and suppliers, underground work was being conducted so as to develop or strengthen a social relationship, and this tended to prevail where friends and neighbors (rather than kin) were involved. This is perhaps unsurprising. After all, exchange is a principal nexus through which social relations are forged and maintained. Why, however, is monetary payment involved?

A first, and perhaps superficial, explanation that can be identified in the responses is that payment was heavily embedded in the norms of reciprocity, especially in the deprived neighborhood. Respondents commonly stated that “it was the natural thing to do”, “I always give people a drink [money] who do me a favor” and “people would never do anything for you again if you didn’t”. Delving deeper why this might be the case, the answers of respondents suggest that there are two predominant reasons for this culture of paying for favors when neighbors and friends are involved.

The first reason is that paying helps avoid the obligation to reciprocate favors but, at the same time, it oils the wheels for the maintenance or creation of closer relations through exchange. In major part, this culture of paying for favors was thus indicative of the demise of trust, especially in the deprived area. Monetary payment was acting as a substitute for trust and a lubricant to facilitate exchange in circumstances where it would otherwise not take place. Consequently, there was a sense that the exchange of cash was a necessary medium when maintaining or building community networks, especially when neighbors or friends were involved. Rather than provide any opportunity for such relations to turn sour if and when they reneged on their commitments, the exchange of cash prevented such a situation arising. As one woman put it,

living in a village like this, the last thing you want to do is to owe somebody a favor and not repay it. I always pay people who do favors for me. That way, I avoid any problems later on.

Here, therefore, payment is used to avoid the need for reciprocity. This explanation for payment was particularly prevalent amongst both elderly populations, those suffering from some chronic illness or disability, single-parent families and work-busy/multiple-earner households, all of whom perceived themselves as potentially unable or incapable of repaying favors. For them, payment was thus a means of avoiding the situation where social relations might turn sour if and when they reneged on their responsibility to repay a favor. By paying cash, they saw themselves as offsetting the need to reciprocate whilst still maintaining and/or cementing networks of social support.

Indeed, the finding of this study was that when friends and neighbors were involved, the only time payment was not made was when it was felt to be unacceptable, inappropriate or impossible to do so. Payment was generally felt to be unacceptable in situations where the favor was too small to warrant a payment (e.g., when a screwdriver was loaned), inappropriate when the social relations mitigated against payment (e.g., when the customer could not afford to pay and had no choice but to offer a favor in return) and impossible in those situations where the supplier would not accept a payment because they wanted a specific favor in return that only the customer could provide (e.g., baby-sitting). In all other circumstances, monetary payment was used whenever favors were received.

The second reason that this culture of paying prevails when neighbors and friends exchange favors is because there was a feeling that you could no longer rely on people to return favors. Again, therefore, this indicates the demise of trust. Rather than allow such relations to turn sour if and when they reneged on their commitments, accepting cash for doing a favor prevented such a situation arising. Norms of reciprocity, it seems, often involve cash that acts as a substitute for trust in the formation and maintenance of networks of reciprocity. Indeed, in this study, of all acts of mutual aid between friends, neighbors and kin, some two-thirds (67 per cent) involved payment, displaying the fairly widespread existence of a culture of paying for favors.

“Redistributive” rationales, meanwhile, usually apply when kin conduct the work. Amongst ‘employers’, paying is often viewed as a means of giving the supplier some much needed spending money, such as when they are unemployed. Indeed, asking kin to do a task in order to give them some needed money was the principal rationale behind 21.3 per cent of all underground work in the deprived neighborhood. As a multiple-earner household in East Retford West put it, “more often than not, it involves people you know, so you are doing them a favor by finding work for them”.

Or as a retired male in a no-earner household in the deprived neighborhood put it, "I . . . get people to do work to help them out". Underground work was thus a way of giving money to kin that avoided all connotations of charity, even if this was their intention. As Kempson (1996) has previously revealed, people avoid accepting charity at all costs. This was well understood by the populations surveyed here. As a result, anybody wishing to give aid paid them for doing a task to "help them out".

Suppliers, meanwhile, also displayed "redistributive" motives, particularly when kin were the customers and sometimes when friends and neighbors were involved. Many undeclared workers asserted that they already knew the customer and had conducted the work because the person would not otherwise have been able to do it. In these instances, which constituted 13 per cent of all underground work supplied, those involved were either mainly people with professional craft skills (e.g., plumbers, electricians) and often formally employed who supplied these skills to close social relations for a fee well under the market price, or else they were unemployed or early retired people who saw themselves as helping out those who had less free time than themselves by supplying their time.

To read underground work as market-like and motivated by monetary gain on the part of employers therefore, is to discuss the motives underpinning just 59 per cent of all underground work in this study and just 30 per cent if those motives that attached qualifying or additional conditions to such a motive are extracted. More importantly, it is to read underground work more through the lens of its meaning to people living in the affluent area than from the position of people in the deprived area. If underground work is to be read in a manner more reflective of its meanings to these latter populations, therefore, then not only will the heterogeneous work relations and motives need to be recognized but also greater emphasis will have to be put on reading such work through the lens of gift-exchange rather than through the lens of market-like activity pursued for monetary gain. Consequently, even if there has been the penetration of monetary relations into ever more spheres of social life (c.f., Harvey 1989; Sayer 1997), these exchanges are by no means everywhere embedded in the motive of monetary gain.

CONCLUSIONS

To evaluate critically the dominant discourse that views all monetary exchange as motivated by the pursuit of monetary gain, this paper has taken a sphere of work that is assumed widely and commonly to be market-like and

conducted for this purpose. Unpacking the work relations and motives underpinning underground work using detailed case study evidence from North Nottinghamshire in England, its finding is that monetised exchange in the underground sector of the economy cannot be fully understood in such “thin” terms as market-like work conducted for monetary gain. Instead, this study uncovers that the social relations and motives involved are far messier and more complex than has been so far considered. It has shown that although there is underground work that is market-like and motivated by monetary gain, there is also underground work that is more akin to gift-exchange and needs to be analyzed through this lens if it is to be understood.

Indeed, of all acts of mutual aid between friends, neighbors and kin, some two-thirds (67 per cent) have been found to involve payment. On the one hand, this suggests that the scope of what is considered gift-exchange perhaps needs to be broadened to encompass this moral economy of paid favors. On the other hand, this clearly demonstrates that monetary exchange in the underground economy cannot be fully understood in “thin” terms as market-like and motivated by monetary gain. By engaging in these monetary exchanges, these populations are displaying that the relationship between monetary exchange and market relations is not hermetically sealed. Money, it seems, is not always the disembedding force that is sometimes propounded (e.g., Sayer 1997). Although the motive of monetary gain appears to have penetrated underground work relatively deeply amongst people in affluent suburbs, its intrusion is shallower amongst those in deprived areas. This research thus not only reinforces the view of Zelizer (1994: 215) that “Money has not become the free, neutral and dangerous destroyer of social relations” but also defines the situation in which this seems to be occurring.

In sum, these findings raise some fascinating issues for future studies of monetary exchange. If even this exemplar of market-like monetary exchange is imbued with non-market relations and rationales other than monetary gain, then there is every reason for those who are seeking to unravel the complex characters and logics of monetised exchange to be bolder in terms of their objects of study. Until now, they have tended to confine themselves to small alternative economic spaces. The outcome, however, has been that they have failed to contest the dominant narrative since the places they study can be easily explained away as marginal or even superfluous spaces that have little relevance for how mainstream monetised exchange is read. The lesson of this study, nevertheless, is that if even the sphere of underground work is messier and more complex than has so far been considered, then there is every likelihood of finding further instances of the need for “thicker” portrayals elsewhere in mainstream economic life. Hopefully, therefore, this

paper will stimulate further enquiry of other economic realms and encourage consideration of whether monetised transactions in other more mainstream spaces are always market-like and motivated by monetary gain. If this occurs, then this paper will have done its job.

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