

BOOK REVIEW

BURKE, BRIAN J. *Social Exchange. Barter as Economic and Cultural Activism in Medellín, Colombia*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick (NJ) 2022. xiii, 224 pp. Ill. \$37.95.

Murder capital of the world in the 1980s and 1990s, Medellín, Colombia, became a successful story of twenty-first century capitalism in the last decade. Or at least that is how municipal governments have promoted the country's second most important city, and newspapers and magazines have periodically celebrated it. From *The New York Times* to *Al Jazeera*, the international press has reported on Medellín as a place of innovation that left a grisly past behind through science, technology, art, and environmentalism. Until the pandemic, when the media hype turned nightmarish. An ever-growing flux of digital nomads and expats looking for affordable housing in a tropical climate has unleashed new dynamics of gentrification, elevating the cost of living for all. Meanwhile, flocks of tourists, usually single men following the blood trail of gangster movies, TV shows, and videogames, arrive to recreate their own Medellín Cartel experience with à la carte menus of affordable drugs and sexual misdemeanors that often include sex crimes against underaged girls and boys.

Whether the lens is a fascination with narcoculture, a belief in the fairy tale of reinvention, or a condemnation of the gruesome realities behind it, public discourses rarely make Medellín look like a vortex of solidarity and anti-capitalist subjectivities. Yet, anthropologist Brian J. Burke embarked on the adventure of finding the undercurrents of capitalism in a place shaped by the cruelest forms of market competition, offering us a smart book of insightful findings that constitutes an excellent classroom resource when teaching economic culture, the history of neoliberalism, or social movements in Latin America.

Organized in six chapters with a short preface, an introduction, and a conclusion, *Social Exchange* is “an effort to reinvigorate our political imaginations” (p. xi) by reconstructing a series of experiments that local communities have implemented in Medellín to cultivate “new senses of time, resourcefulness, rationality, and ourselves that may defy the logic of scarcity on which capitalism depends” (p. xii). Unlike other places well known for their alternative systems of exchange and trade, such as Argentina and Greece, in Medellín barter has not been the creation of a specific financial collapse but rather is the result of a normalized and chronic crisis defined by multiple forms of violence (p. 7). This context allows Burke to examine barter as an experiment of conviction rather than bare necessity.

This ethnographic work constructed on the perspectives of barterers opens with the idea of barter as a “slow revolution”. Burke argues that, despite lacking Great Men, mass uprisings, or disputes over state power, barter aims at changing “the co-constitution of society, economy and culture” (pp. 8–9). Aware of the lax use of

the term “revolution”, the author invites readers to treat the “work of organic intellectuals as legitimate claims to knowledge” and “engage in cothinking” along with them (p. 10). This engagement implies evaluating the organic theories of barter’s revolutionary potential at four levels: *as an alternative to capitalism* (“Medellín barter markets force traders to refocus on use-value rather than exchange-value”, p. 15); *as an alternative to neoliberalism* (barter disrupts a “financialized culture” that entails “greater acceptance of the logic of individualism and privatization”, p. 17); *as an alternative to development* (barter offers “substantial livelihood benefits, including reduced dependence on consumer credit”, p. 18); and *as an alternative to violence* (“barter exchange promotes mutual recognition of each trader’s humanity and establishes bonds of trust”, p. 20). In the process, Burke brings visibility to alternative economies by shedding light on their inner workings and supports activists with an in-depth analysis of what stimulates and hinders barter. His work also offers a model on how to evaluate sociocultural change beyond policy assessment and enhances the theorization of subjectivities by revealing people’s motivations and values when engaging in economic politics (pp. 22–23).

The book chapters oscillate between ethnographic descriptions and theoretical analysis. Chapter One establishes an interpretative framework on how the city’s “diverse economies” have unfolded within a “war system”. Many readers may find this part more helpful than the introduction, in terms of laying out a complex history and some of the heated debates on its interpretation. When, why, and how a city that was considered a model of industrial capitalism mutated into a cocaine dystopia are some of the big questions that Burke tackles here. In conversation with historians, sociologists, and political scientists, he concludes that “the regional identity and a strong entrepreneurial ethic functioned as a form of ‘peacefare’” until profound changes in the mode of production and the emergence of a new political class made violence a logical means to consolidating power (pp. 32–33). Within this emerging “war system”, a diverse economy that articulates formal and informal practices, capitalist and noncapitalist modes came to life. The narco-economy is a significant portion of it, but by no means all. More importantly, Burke argues, “the historical experience of negotiating this diverse economy has led to the emergence of an economic logic characterized by ‘pragmatic pluralism’” (p. 49).

The idea of violence as economically generative and the concept of “pragmatic pluralism” serve as bridges to the core of Burke’s ethnographic work in the next two chapters. Chapter Two dives into the earliest barter projects in the municipality of Bello, the neighborhood of Altamira, the hamlet of Pajarito – and a few fleeting ones, such as the bazaars of the neighborhoods of Carlos E. Restrepo and La América – all of which emerged as community-based responses to violence and its aftermath. Chapter Three analyzes exclusively the barter market of the mountain town of Santa Elena, which lasted for more than a decade (from 2005 to 2016) and constituted a clear example of how alternative regimes of value are co-creations through a dialectic of practice, theory, ethics, and aesthetics. In both chapters, Burke examines “markets not only as spheres of economic exchange, but also as phenomenological and social experiences” (p. 85), namely, as spaces for the day-to-day collective negotiation of rules, sanctions, desires, and values from which

a different worldview arises. In other words, Burke's search for barter's "slow revolution" takes him beyond ideology to the terrain of practice and ethics, where "the lived, sensual and social" are combined (p. 85).

In the last three chapters, Burke returns to a theoretical tone to provide an analysis on the ramifications of barter at three levels. In Chapter Four, he examines the practical; more specifically, how "barter markets allow traders to evade the structural constraints of capitalism by sparking alternative, non-capitalist modes of production and different ways of mobilizing labor, resources, skills and investments" (p. 115). In Chapter Five, Burke focuses on subjectivities and the deep shifts in the "technology of the self" that barter allows when providing participants with the "embodied social and material practice", "linguistic effects", and "emotional life" to craft nonnormative identities (p. 137). Finally, in Chapter Six, Burke evaluates how organizers and activists navigate "capitalocentric" imaginaries, and the strategies they have used to confront "the twin dynamics of social fragmentation and centralized leadership that have accompanied violence" (p. 159). Guided by his role as participant, organizer, and activist of some of the barter experiments that he analyzes, Burke concludes the book with a series of suggestions for how "Medellín barter organizers might more effectively advance their project" (p. 177).

Throughout the book, Burke carefully weaves his original research with the work of others on faraway geographies, from New Zealand to South Africa, Argentina to Venezuela, and he demonstrates how Medellín's barter projects are not isles but part of global movements imagining and projecting different futures. However, in a city with a history of violence that has established world records of brutality, where even those seeking alternatives see "capitalism as having colonized nearly all of social and economic life, even our innermost thoughts and desires, and having banished other practices, motives, and desire to the margins" (p. 166), one cannot help but wonder if this insightful book is an ethnography of a dream. The many projects that Burke carefully dissects are attempts that do not amount to a system, gestures that have lacked consistency, stability, coherence, cohesion, and depth. Many protagonists acknowledge it, Burke included. Yet, his examination also reveals the potential of the "pragmatic pluralism" that has characterized Medellín since the collapse of its industrial model and the emergence of a violent dynamic almost half a century ago. The "impure" and imperfect articulations of conventional and alternative economies is Medellín's contribution to the dream of a different world, where the sociocultural power of capitalism is eroded, and new practices, institutions, and subjectivities consolidate to enact and sustain more just and ecologically sustainable economies. Burke's intelligent and committed work illuminates how in the "insistence to see the world differently and to inhabit the world differently in order to make the world different" (p. 192) barter's slow revolution simmers.

Lina Britto

Department of History, Northwestern University, Evanston (IL), United States

E-mail: lina.britto@northwestern.edu