
REVIEW

Economic Myth Making and the Anthropocene

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Tischer, Jenni, and Eva Maria Stadler, eds. *Abstraction & Economy: Myths of Growth*. Edition Angewandte. Boston: DE GRUYTER, 2024.

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As an interdisciplinary journal, we are often approached for book reviews of Anthropocene-themed art publications. While such publications are definitely within the remit of this journal, it is often more interesting to approach the topic of the Anthropocene from an indirect angle. After all, the journal statement encourages readers and authors to 'rethink notions such as abstraction, art, architecture, design, governance, ecology, law, politics and discourses of science in the context of human, inhuman and posthuman frameworks'. In many cases, Anthropocene themed art can feel overly didactic or give the impression of a rebranded environmental art. Therefore, I was very pleased to be sent an 'art book' for review that did not feature 'Anthropocene' in the title but touched on significant issues.

The collection *Abstraction & Economy: Myths of Growth*, edited by Eva Maria Stadler and Jenni Tischer, connects to anthropological and sociological enquiries into value, such as David Graeber's (2001) or Helen Verran's work (2013). It continues a productive destabilisation of capitalist principles by looking at historical examples and showing their repercussions for the present. Examples include the colonial legal violence around landownership and the energy requirements of bitcoin mining. I put the word 'art book' in inverted commas, because the contributions are interdisciplinary in nature. Still, its design and curation give the book a very 'arty' feel, not just because of its constant re-centring on art, but also because of its design. Every page, including the cover, is printed on squared paper, the text moving across and between lines. This visual approach makes the book quite difficult to read, though this forced deceleration seems intentional. The design is made even more busy by different font coloration and thicknesses, and by displaying certain things (headings, numbers and authors' names) and in a wonky style, probably selected to visualise the intended subversion of 'grids'. The stylistic diversity and density of information within the chapters generate a sense of exhaustion, though not in a bad way. I liked how the dry promise of the cover and the complexity

of the content made for a neat reflection of capitalism's surface presentation versus its lived reality.

I definitely do not regret struggling with this book. At first, the many angles and case studies may appear disjointed: an economic analysis might be followed by the detailed description of a bank building, and again followed by an explanation of an artist's approach to abstraction. In my case, the placement of these rather different approaches side by side led to unexpected connections. Even if I was not that interested in the specificities of a particular artwork or architecture style, for example, another essay that follows might place them in a new context. Where this was not the case, generative pauses and question marks were generated.

So how do the editors actually describe their project? The blurb explains that it seeks to raise questions about the 'aesthetic regime of capitalism'. If I was an art journal editor, I would perhaps ask: haven't artists and academics commented enough on their reluctant participation in the capitalist economy? What else can there be to say? Despite references to some of these preceding reflections, *Abstraction & Economy* shows that much more can need to be said. In a time where politicians and their voters seem to actively avoid economy-related questions, for example by concentrating on 'culture wars', it is important to redirect attention to the core sources of misery. I received the book after finishing Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes* (2024), which is superb at showing the effectiveness of culture wars in making people buy into their own oppression. There are some useful parallels in the way the two projects underscore the historical continuity of economic violence and people's limited choices in the face of absurd valuations. I also recently watched Oeconomia (2020), Carmen Losmann's film on the perverse workings of the contemporary economy. Subsequently reading *Abstraction & Economy*, I felt strongly reminded of Losmann's questioning and the sense of vertigo that such questioning generates.

In *Abstraction & Economy*, the sense of vertigo is generated by an examination of the social functions of abstraction. Beat Weber's essay on the geography of money, for example, discusses 'economic value as a social

judgment' (p. 86). Such social judgments manifest in ideas, such as 'creditworthiness' on individual and national scales, but also in taxation choices that feign a grounding in 'facts' against a reality of fabrication. Weber's explanations of valuation are given an even more destabilising dimension by Sven Lüttichen whose chapter focuses on living with abstraction. Lüttich mobilises some poignant examples such as Natasha Sadr Haghghian's 'report' *Dear Artfukts, Look at My Curve* (2013), provoked by an algorithmically generated graph of her artistic career (p. 145), or Franz Wilhelm Seiwert's statement that 'all stabilisation is a con' (p. 147), which addresses the desire for calculability (I was reminded of work by Lee Mackinnon here). Such desires are often undervalued in Anthropocene-related discourse in favour of more material 'accounting'. This is lamented by Marina Vischmidt in her essay 'Core Absence', where she criticises the approaches of apparently emancipatory politics such as the Green New Deal.

The most terrifying examples in the book highlight the scales of economic violence, such as Brenna Bhandar's essay on 'legal abstractions'. Bhandar's focus on colonial land grabs and their on-going legitimacy represents a chilling reminder about the longevity and invisibility of coloniality under capitalism. By tracing the economic grounding of the justice system, she exposes justice as a fiction, and the system as a generator of further 'legal fictions' to perpetuate historical injustices (p. 131). This link between legal violence and land cultivation and its far-reaching legacies will be of particular interest to Anthropocene scholars. The theme of material and legal absences is also taken up by Denise Ferreira da Silva. In her essay 'Blacklight', she calls for greater attention to the 'obscurations that are the condition of possibility for global capital' (p. 168). A key argument is that inconvenient

categories and calculations, for example, in relation to slave labour, are disappeared by 'bright, transparent concepts and categories', the White-washed, public image of economics (p. 167).

Overall, the book made me wish for more such conversations on economics. By this, I do not necessarily mean interdisciplinary conversations, as people from different disciplines can still refer back to the same theories and case studies. Instead, I would like to see more connections across time and space that can hopefully translate into counter-narratives to the ones perpetuated by politicians, mainstream media and conservative textbooks. Too often, economic questions are reduced to their fictions, which may lead us miss the point and 'mitigate' at the wrong end. Here, *Abstraction & Economy* represents a thought-provoking intervention.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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