



An introductory framework for 'Habilito: Debt for Life'

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Abstract

The documentary film *Habilito: Debt for Life* provides a case study of the conflicts and tensions that arise at the point of contact between highland migrants and Mosevenes, members of an indigenous community in the Bolivian Amazon. It focuses particularly on a system of debt peonage known locally as 'habilito'. This system is used throughout the Bolivian lowlands, and much of the rest of the Amazon basin, to secure labor in remote areas. Timber merchants advance market goods to Mosevenes at inflated prices, in exchange for tropical hardwood timber. When it comes time to settle accounts, the indebted person often finds that the wood he has cut does not meet his debt obligation, and he has to borrow more money to return to the forest to continue logging. This permanent cycle of debt permits actors from outside these indigenous communities to maintain control over the extraction of wood and provides them with a free source of labor in the exploitation of timber resources. This system is practiced especially in remote areas where systems of patronage predominate, and where colonists with a market-based economic logic come into contact with Amazonian indigenous peoples who, historically, have not employed an economic logic of saving or hoarding.

Keywords

Bolivia, debt, debt peonage, habilito, logging, Mosevenes

Habilito: Debt for Life provides a case study about the system of debt peonage used to secure labor for the extraction of resources from Amazonian territories. It explores the extraction of timber from the Mosevén Communal Lands in the tropical lowlands of Bolivia. Timber merchants advance market goods, including tools, to indigenous people at inflated prices, in exchange for valuable hardwood timber and other forest products. When it comes time to settle accounts, the indebted person almost always finds that the wood he has cut does not meet his debt obligation, and he has to borrow more money to return to the forest to continue cutting. This permanent cycle of debt permits actors from outside these indigenous communities to maintain control over the extraction of wood and provides them with a free source of labor in the exploitation of these resources.

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Both the film and the research on which it is based frame this system in terms of the debate between formalist and substantivist interpretations of economic systems (Polanyi, 1944).¹ A formalist understanding of economic activities presupposes resource scarcity, and therefore understands the economy as a “relationship between ends and means, the way in which a man manipulates his technical resources to achieve his goals” (Burling, 1962: 811). That is, economic activities are viewed as means of optimizing material resource allocation. Substantivist or ‘culturalist’ approaches instead seek to understand how societies meet their material needs, through whatever institutions are important locally (Gudeman, 1986; Polanyi, 1944). Under this framework, there is no reason to assume that these institutions will optimize resource allocation or rationalize production (Godelier, 1974).

The film explores these issues by examining the conflict between different economic logics: that of Mosevenes and that of colonists from the Andes. While colonists employ a market-based economic logic that treats land and other resources as commodities, Mosevén economic logic has its roots in their predominant history as a society of hunters and gatherers. As such, Mosevén economic logic is more similar to that of ‘original affluent societies’, marked by mobility, abundance, and a disinterest in the accumulation of resources. According to Sahlins (1972: 30-31), such affluent societies are marked by “prodigality: the propensity to eat right through all the food in the camp [and] the failure to put by food surpluses, to develop food storage”. For Sahlins, “Such ‘material plenty’ depends partly upon the ease of production, and that upon the simplicity of technology and democracy of property” (p. 10). That is, Mosevenes do not operate under a capitalist logic; they neither accumulate capital to invest, nor save for harder times.

In this context, *habilito* – simultaneously a means for Mosevenes to gain quick access to cash and market goods and a “trapwork of obligations” (Taussig, 1987: 22) – establishes a particularly insidious system of unequal exchange. Similar systems – sometimes referred to as *enganche*, from the Spanish word for ‘hook’ – have been in operation in the Amazon since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, when they were employed to retain indigenous workers in the rubber industry (Bedoya and Bedoya, 2004; Block, 1994; Garcia Jordán, 1998; Herrera, Cárdena, and Terceros, 2005; Taussig, 1987). These systems thrive in remote locations as a means to recruit and retain cheap labor where there is not sufficient population to develop a labor market in the conventional sense (Bedoya and Bedoya, 2005; Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000). They generally involve the exchange of manufactured goods and basic subsistence rations at inflated prices (Bedoya and Bedoya, 2005; Killick, 2008). Marginalized people like the Mosevenes may not be able to access these goods by other means, and, if they can, may not be aware of their prices in commercial markets. This leaves them at a disadvantage when it comes to negotiating with the intermediaries who provide access. This type of commodity exchange embedded in a particular social context and specific social relationships (Gow, 1991; Granovetter, 1985; Killick, 2011) allows merchants to establish “deeply distorted system of equivalences” (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 1995: 277).

One of the factors that grant systems of debt peonage their particular power of coercion is that this kind of exchange carries specific social meanings. David Graeber (2011) argues that it is precisely this tension between social obligations and the monetized, quantifiable character of debt that makes debt such a morally charged idea the world around. This broad pattern unfolds differently in specific contexts. For instance, Killick (2008) argues that Mestizo timber merchants and Ashéninka men view their relationships through the lenses of hierarchical fictive kin relationships and egalitarian, delayed-reciprocity trading relationships, respectively. Li (2014) details the often conflicting role that kinship, debt, and social relationships have played, as the closing of the land frontier in the Lauje region has resulted in

the conversion of land use from a system of lightly governed common ownership to a commodity system where land is subject to purchase, sale, and mortgage. Yet all of these exchanges occur in a context in which the possible choice available to individuals in indigenous communities, as well as the merchants with whom they deal, are limited by forces beyond their control. On account of the social meanings that they contain – for Lauje and Mosetenes, as well as indigenous people in other locations – cash and material advances have the capacity to “concentrate powers of attraction, coercion, and authority into a single package” (Li, 2014: 51). The film, *Habilito: Debt for Life*, is an attempt to render these powers visible.

Notes

1. The film was co-directed with Daniela Ricco Quiroga and originally produced as an accompaniment to her 2010 doctoral thesis. The Royal Anthropological Institute released the film on DVD in 2013.

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