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### Title

Petrobarter: oil, inequality, and the political imagination in and after the Cold War.

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Oil's advantage over gold lies in its more elastic supply, elastic to not only price signals but political ones as well.

### Conclusion: Barter, Dollar, or Euro?

So when the Russians or the Iranians barter oil, they are not proposing an alternative to the US dollar or to money as such. They are merely pursuing a strategy of "live and let live" on the margins of the US-dollar-reserve-currency-backed-by-oil floating exchange rate regime. This is by no means an "alternative imaginary" but rather an acknowledgment of US international macroeconomic monetary monopoly. This is not an act of challenge or submission but one of getting by on its margins, without paying tribute. The true challenge is to sell oil in euros or some other potential reserve currency, and we know what happened to Saddam when he tried that.

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Douglas Rogers's article is a welcome reminder of what anthropology can contribute to the effort to understand economies by underscoring how they are always plural or internally multiple. In line with others who have urged social scientists away from the "capitalocentrism" (Gibson-Graham 2006:35) of some critical approaches, Rogers illuminates how petrobarter presents a different take on oil economies. In anthropology and allied fields, it is as if the analysts themselves have been dazzled by the magic of money, in its role as the general equivalent, as much as their interlocutors who see in oil not only its fungibility but also its ability to abstract, deracinate, and destroy.

Now, I am all for a good dazzle. But the point of being dazzled, Marilyn Strathern says, is to allow oneself the suspension that allows us to hover "on the threshold of understanding" (Strathern 1999:11). Certain critical approaches, with their certainties about abstraction and equilibration, too rapidly complete the equation assumed in exchange rather than allowing the kind of suspense Rogers's article affords, or that the irresolution barter itself provides.

For barter is different from mere exchange. Barter depends on the specificities of things, persons, and relations. Again, Strathern: it is not an exchange of sago for pigs, but *this* sago for *that* pig. Barter always entails its own spatiotemporal referents in its enactment (see Maurer 2006:22; Strathern 1992). Thus, the space of Perm becomes important in Rogers's story: it cannot be any oil. It has to be *that* oil. Where other analysts have come to oil and money with a language of equivalence and exchange, then, Rogers seems to point toward a language of substitution and payment (Maurer 2012b). This makes petrobarter a pragmatic operation.

The mistake, of course (not committed by Rogers, but I

can imagine a possible misreading), is to assume that with barter we have the situated and embodied whereas with monetary exchange, we have the hyperreal, abstract, and eviscerated. But even monetary exchange is shot through with particularity. While in one moment or phase, we see reference to the "external, generalized standard," in another moment or phase, someone is feeling the crispness of the banknote, flipping the coin for luck, waving the mobile phone in the air to catch the vibrations and the money running through them. The materiality, in short, matters. Rogers quotes a newspaper article: petrobarter schemes were "impossible to understand. Unless you participated in them." Precisely.

A larger question the article raises is, what is the nature of the "alternative?" Rogers's gestures toward temporality and my invocation of the concept of phase provides a possible answer. Where anthropology once may have contented itself with delineating the articulations of modes of production or developing typologies of reciprocity and redistribution, in this case—and many others—what comes forward is the oscillating back and forth between two or more states (see Maurer 2012a). This has implications for how we imagine our plural world(s) and invites reflection on the relationship between Rogers's effort and recent work on ontology. This is something I leave for others, except to say that I think Rogers does not give himself due credit in his conclusion. It is not so much that his analysis shows a "glimpse [of] some of the cracks" in global political economy. It opens up the question: One world, or many? Or one, with many within? I am content to defer, for now, to William James, writing in 1909: "The word *or* names a genuine reality" (James 1909:324). Rogers shows how it can become anthropology's task to illustrate that reality.

Finally, a relatively unrelated coda: I cannot help but hear in the ARCO executive's statement, "Oil is almost like money," a prefiguring of European Consumer Commissioner Meglena Kuneva's (2009) statement that "personal data is the new oil." Insofar as the exchangeability, barter, gifting, or expropriation of data is becoming a pressing political and academic concern, postsocialist experiences with petrobarter may provide other analogies to the stories we are likely to hear about expropriation, enclosure, and commodification—will this data be treated as almost like money? In some quarters, it already is. But that does not mean we give in to its magic.

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Rogers concludes his important discussion of "petrobarter" noting that its analysis reveals "some of the cracks, challenges, and alternatives in the workings of the global political economy." Having situated his argument in the context of petroleum