

Comment by Anthony J. Pickles on Guido Sprenger's 'Expectations of the Gift: Toward a Future-Oriented Taxonomy of Transactions'

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This was a sparkingly original and thought-provoking article. In a field where complicating particularism ('but here things are more muddled') and conceptual neophilia ('try these novelty glasses') are the norm, Sprenger's broad, sophisticated comparativism is a cool drink on a hot day.

The argument springs from two postulates: 1. Transactional categories should not begin from archetypes, they should be derived from analytical features that emerge out of ethnographic findings and comparison. 2. The prime referent for transactional categorisation should be the way each transaction shapes expectations of future transactions. I question whether Sprenger really achieves the former, and query whether the latter is really necessary, but Sprenger has built an elegant algebra of transactional 'taxa' from both in combination. The resulting analytical techniques have broad potential to refine our understanding of economic activity.

Postulate 1: As Sprenger noted, in 2020 I argued the case for a more inductive approach to transactional categorisation and outlined how to build descriptions using a less theoretically burdensome lexicon based around *transfers*. Such a minimalist lexicon would establish a baseline from which we can make inductive descriptions of actual transaction. If this is too much to hope for, at least we might reconcile our observations. I hoped that my effort would become a staging post in an imaginative project that takes our understanding forward. One that breaks from the contemporary monotony of anthropologists revealing that the world complicates our transactional categories. Sprenger shares my concern, but his approach is a little different. While I advocate for minimalist and theoretically unladen terms to construct complex ethnographically determined descriptions, Sprenger brings in a second raft of concepts which are also deductively generated and strictly defined (value, expectation, alterity, opacity, among others). The arrangement of these concepts can be reconfigured by the anthropologist to fit specific cases, or so it is argued by Sprenger. Noting how these concepts are transformed while they are adapted to different ethnographic examples unlocks an open-ended theoretical language for comparison. Sprenger demonstrates this using a range of gifts, commodity trades and instances of sharing as his examples. Presumably in order to make space for the broad logical connections between transactional taxa, the ethnographic description becomes thin and reductive in places. The level of generality of the ethnographic descriptions and the apparent homogeneity of their meanings in Sprenger's writing makes for compelling logical connections between transactions across contexts, but there seemed little room for local variations in interpretation within a given context and across different contexts where similar transactions occur. This may be a price worth paying for conceptual clarity, but there is a bargain here and there are costs. A longer piece might achieve insightful comparison while sacrificing minimal descriptive fidelity, but more often clarity falters under the weight of specificity.

Sprenger improves my terminology by using 'taxa' to denote the ideal-typical transaction-types coined by anthropologists. He also uses 'type' for local or emic categorisations. A quibble: I personally think 'type' is too similar a word to 'taxon' in an already jargonistic field of inquiry; a word like 'strain' instead of 'type' would both make the distinction between emic and etic categorisations more obvious and the word 'strain' conveys the sense that emic categorisations may be fuzzy. As an example, the common-use English language word 'present' is strained from the soup of overlapping words ('gift', 'loan', 'donation', 'handout', 'benefaction', 'gratuity', 'largess') that may have been chosen for the transaction depending on the perspective of the actors involved. A word like 'type' implies unambiguous boundaries that should not be assumed. The boundaries of emic categories are not always fuzzy, but the language should account for the fact they might be.

Postulate 2: While Sprenger strenuously denies that one anthropologist-defined taxon (e.g. commodity exchange) is a derivative of another (e.g. gifting), he claims that it would be helpful if one taxon could be described adequately in the terms of another for the purposes of cross-contextual

comparison. Sprenger achieves this by bringing in a modifier: future-orientation. Seen through the lens of future-orientation, Sprenger thinks different taxa can appear as algebraic (my word, not his) reconfigurations of each other.

Sprenger is, of course, right to highlight that transactions are temporal phenomena as much as they are movements of value, with dynamic foregrounding and backgrounding of states and statuses that occur through transactional sequences. While skilfully presented, this is not especially revelatory. Iconic contributors to theorisations of transaction all make movement over time a pillar in their models (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1966, Bourdieu 1977, Woodburn 1982, Bloch and Parry 1989, Strathern 1988). Much of the continued potency of these contributions comes down to the clarity and conceptual development of the dynamic in their models (wife-givers and wife-takers, habitus, dynamic exchange hierarchies, the careful recomposition of gendered imbalance). What Sprenger does particularly well is capture a crucial difference between the emic and etic perspectives on timing. Sprenger's formulation evoked the image of raindrops falling into a pond, first seen from above and then from the surface of the water; the effects of individual transactions—the raindrops—cause ripples on the surface of the pond that is social life. This is clear from above the pond, but equally important for Sprenger is the perspective of the pond-skater (those people for whom the transaction has some direct importance), for whom the overall pattern of the ripples can be hidden by the undulations of the water and may be disrupted by other raindrops. If my flighty analogy holds then the turbulence caused by the rain appears to the pond-skater as uncertainty about the future: what is behind the next wave? From up above the pond, Sprenger sees uncertainties as 'contingencies' which follow a pattern that can explain the movements, while paying attention to how pond-skaters react to the changeable conditions.

Sprenger concentrates upon the transactions that anthropologists label 'gifts,' and three dynamizing contingencies that shape the ripples they produce:

1. Gifts enable but don't ensure returns, therefore are best understood in terms of expectation rather than obligation.
2. The gift projects a social whole that shares the values the gift embodies and is constituted by a complementary asymmetry between givers and takers. This social whole requires further gifting to consummate and affirm its existence.
3. The gifts are clear when they are gifted, but the person involved and their intentions are hidden in the act, creating the conditions for further gift-elucidations.

The result is a set of attributes that can vary in their expression: the expectation of giving and receiving; the expectation of return; the expectation of specific return; the moral horizon; whether personhood is opaque or transparent; are there shared values?; is the relation between exchangers one of alterity? Think of these as the properties of the ripples. These gift-derived contingencies are then applied to the taxa commodity exchange and sharing, noting the conceptual adaptation that was necessary to make the descriptions operate effectively. Are the ripples denser, are they steeper, do they dissipate quicker?

Not wanting to regurgitate the argument any longer, I found the way different transactional taxa appeared as specific configurations of Sprenger's chosen attributes very thought provoking. I intend to try applying this method in future work. I was particularly taken with how the algebra accounted for how gift exchanges produce a valorised and complementary hierarchy and asymmetry while commodity exchanges are criticised in terms of their power imbalance. If anything, I thought more space could have been given to exploring what the different configurations of attributes for different

taxa told us about how transactions stand apart from each other. I hope Sprenger has more to say on this in the future.

Sprenger emerged into this conceptual clearing by thinking in terms of future-orientation. It helped him to build his algebra, but I am less sure that the scaffolding need remain once the system is erected. Just as the deductive concepts were well-chosen for their purpose but are not immutable necessities for an effective analysis, I don't think that all "these aspects of comparison [necessarily] derive from the principle of an unpredictable future". They might equally derive from social memory and the imprint of memory on a rolling present. How else should we account for those with unshakeable faith? Or those who are driven by grief? Or slaves to precedent? What about people whose future is determined for them by others? What of an endowment? What about the gift of Christ's sacrifice in Christianity, which can never be returned or matched? Each of these complicate the idea that the future must seem unpredictable for Sprenger's analysis to generate insight. All these examples might be explainable in terms of an unpredictable future, but that doesn't mean they must or even should be. As far as I am concerned, it is the motion that matters rather than the temporal conceptualisation. It would be better to include a variety of approaches to time than assume an unpredictable future.

In fact, at crucial passages, temporality (that is, orientations to time past, present and future) might have served the argument better than the singular focus on the future (and expectations of it). For instance, Sprenger writes that because gifts do not determine a return but rather create an expectation, the gift 'opens up future possibilities'. This is not so, expectation narrows the field of possibility, even if it doesn't do so to quite the same extent as obligation would. Elsewhere, Sprenger claims gifts *can only* appear as follow-ups to earlier transfers. Not so, initiatory gifts are common, and while these are also commonly described as precipitated by some characteristic of the recipient (beauty, dignity, needfulness) this is not always the case. Reinforcing my previous point, these were times when the text strains to apply a future-orientation framework based on expectations when there isn't really a call for it.

Sprenger over-accentuates the potential of thinking in terms of expectations, and this leads him to commit two major errors: he is wrong when he writes all gifts are about expectations in general. He is also wrong when he claims specific transfers necessarily raise specific expectations for social wholes or wholesome persons. But even so, his algebra is compelling and captivating, and it makes an important contribution. The core of this contribution is Sprenger's tripartite formulation: transaction types (contingent, ethnographically determined and rigorously described using neutral terminology), contingencies (that which is undetermined at any given moment), and attribute configurations (the tightly described concepts that change in describable, comparable ways when translocated to different transactions). Employing these three together enables complex but meaningful comparisons across contexts and transactional forms. Sprenger's algebra is thereby able to reach a level of insight that is extraordinary and extensible. This is a fascinating and intriguing reimagination of transactional categories on non-categorical foundations and I hope others recognise it as I do. It is not the general algebra of all transfers however, just one possible mathematics.

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