

# ***Frontlines: Class, Value, and Social Transformation in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism.***

## **Research proposal UiB**

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### **A) Introduction: the research project**

The 'Frontlines' project is an ambitious endeavor to occupy the space for innovative class driven research on global capitalism and inequality left vacated in between Piketty's 'Capital' (2013) and Graeber's 'Debt' (2011) - both powerful landmarks in the current intellectual climate. It proposes to do so from a well-developed starting point in Anthropological Political Economy. The team, working in several world-regional locations, will elaborate a fresh multi-scalar methodological impulse in social anthropology, which seeks to simultaneously universalize, compare and specify among cases. Another originality of the current project resides in its interrogation of key regional properties of capitalist transformation through the particular ethnographic prism of the '*frontlines of value*' notion. Internationally networked and closely collaborating with other research projects in social anthropology, possibly also other groups at UiB, the project will help to strengthen the theoretical discussions within social anthropology in Bergen, in Norway, and worldwide, and trigger interdisciplinary and methodological innovation around the currently exciting fields of class, value and capitalism. It aims to put UiB in the lead of such global discussions.

### **B) The Research Theme**

#### **B1: Introduction**

Intellectually and socio-politically the present conjuncture is marked by the unprecedented successes of Thomas Piketty's 'Capital' (2013), on the one hand, and David Graeber's 'Debt' (2011), on the other. Both books on inequality have sold over hundreds of thousands of copies and have been swiftly translated into more than 25 languages. This, for highly scholarly books that each feature hundreds of pages of dense text and data, is remarkable, to say the least. These tomes, however, gain their public significance within and against a background of a transforming, uneven, and increasingly turbulent – that is 'dangerously blind-in-the-aggregate' - global capitalism, bent on financialization, fictitious accumulation, high-tech driven social disruption, and ecological destruction. Their upshot is the further amplification of public concern with inequality, social stagnation, and indebtedness. Local/global urban rebellions, meanwhile, punctuate, and give popular meaning to, the global/local crises that appear all but mass-produced within this conjuncture; crises which in their turn generate

and are generated by new-old feral moral imaginations of egalitarianism and hierarchy (see Bruce Kapferer's UiB ERC program).

It can be argued that both these public mind-setting books focus squarely on issues of class. But both, at the same time, also adroitly skirt the question of class; at least the anthropological notion of class as a set of complex and dynamic, exploitative and extractive, socio-spatial, and deeply political relationships that are essential for the simultaneous empowering of the capitalist engine, the disciplining of its core subjects, and the disempowering of its ever renewed surplus populations, abandoned spaces, and economies (see Kalb 2015; Kashmir and Carbonella 2014). Both authors openly evade the concept of class rather than retuning it for new times, just like they evade a relational and spatiotemporal vision of capitalism (à la David Harvey) in favor of the relative empirical banalities of respectively 'wealth' and 'money' – which are both, theoretically speaking, nothing more than conventional staples of economics and anthropology, and indeed of public opinion as it is. Both books are of historical importance for the story they tell. But they fail in the face of the so much needed theoretical reinvigoration of the social sciences and the public imagination<sup>1</sup>. The 'class compasses' (Therborn 2013) that are built into the ongoing spectacular episodes of popular outrage remain therefore fundamentally under-served by the contemporary 'theory class' - a fact cunningly exploited by the currently flourishing philosopher-therapists of crisis such as Žižek and Badiou.

The present proposal for a theoretically driven research program in anthropology on "*Frontlines: class, value, and social transformation in 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism*" is, first, an attempt to re-occupy the conceptual terrain thus vacated. Secondly, it seeks to wed this theoretical project to a newly minted global-ethnographic, discovery-driven, empirical agenda for the social sciences (including history and geography) around the spatially uneven, and steadily differentiating, global/local contradictions and antagonisms of class. It seeks to do this in a fully interdisciplinary theoretical fashion, but with its feet firmly in the historical ethnographic research traditions of social anthropology, ultimately with the will to energize both.

Social anthropology in Bergen has an awe inspiring empirical tradition. It has been noted in reviews of the department that it would now profit from a renewed engagement with theory, as is true for social anthropology in Norway and Scandinavia at large. Current research projects at the department, such as Kapferer's ERC funded 'Egalitarianism' program, have taken such suggestions on board. The 'Frontlines' proposal continues in this line, now in the direction of class and anthropological political economy, with the ambition to re-tool anthropology methodologically and theoretically (see below) for deeper

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<sup>1</sup> One could argue that we could grasp back to Pierre Bourdieu's celebrated work on class here. But Bourdieu, in his 1970s and 1980s work, failed to theoretically engage seriously with global capitalist transformations and should for the present purposes be seen as a 'high welfare state theorist'. This is different for his work of the nineties, which became more ethnographic and directly political. It did not lead to new conceptual elaborations on class, however.

engagement with globalizing capitalism and its social and territorial transformations.

## B2: New anthropologies of class

To re-energize class theory via social anthropology, and, reciprocally, anthropological theory and practice via a rethinking of class, is an oxymoronic undertaking. Social anthropology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has kept itself far away from the politically unsafe idea of class, often programmatically seeking communities of cultural sharing rather than the antagonistic and contradictory social relations of class. It was also hesitant, overall, to deal with space-place relations within the historical geography of capitalism (and imperialism etc), which could have enabled a dynamic approach to class. In its 20<sup>th</sup> century fieldwork-based version, it had a proclivity for studying within the boundaries of small places, mostly located on the margins of capitalist accumulation, and tended to construct these places and boundaries as natural historical givens rather than as the ongoing and changing outcome of boundary making work within the shifting and power-laden socio-spatial networks of capitalist development (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Kalb 2005; Trouillot 2003; Wolf 1982, 1991). The short structural Marxist interlude in the 1970s dealt more with modes of production at large than with the micro discovery of class relations and the intricacies of class formation, in contrast to the 'new social history' and the emergent Marxian cultural studies of the day. Nevertheless, in the work of its best representatives, in particular in American anthropological political economy (and its programmatic turn to history and space) powerful impulses were given toward an emergent spatio-temporally envisioned agenda around class as a set of key relationships of social and territorial reproduction (Kalb 1997, 2015; Wolf 1982). The gradual shift from studying tribes to studying peasantries, and then finally to researching global urban modernity in the full (and from there back again to rural dwellers and indigenous people now seen as no longer on the outside of the process), has allowed that vision to come to fruition in variable conceptual forms and pluralist research practices, all of them primarily driven by an agenda of empirical discovery (For example: Barber and Lem 2014; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Collins 2010; Kalb 1997, 2005, 2011, 2015; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Mollona 2009 a+b; Nash 1980, 1986; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Roseberry 1989; Rothstein and Blim 1992; Sider 1985, 2015;; Smith 2015).

Paradoxically, this was happening right at the time that Western sociologists and social historians, keen on class in the 1970s, were abandoning the class concept in the context of 'the end of class', the 'adieu au proletariat', and postmodernism's rejection of grand narratives, with its escalating interest in consumption and chosen lifestyles, indeed identity politics (Harvey 1989; Friedman 2008; Kalb 2015; Sewell 2005). The geography discipline, however, following the lead of such authors as Harvey, Massey, and Smith (two of whom became professors of anthropology), entered into a stimulating conversation with anthropological political economy, and vice versa. The surprising upshot seems to have been that anthropologists (and geographers) were for once strongly placed to start to deal with the profound and intricate issues of class

that were pushed relentlessly to the forefront as late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century global capitalism was so obviously disrupting social habitats everywhere, as well as itself. Anthropology has thus learnt to talk in empirically informed, dynamic, and situated ways about such now circulating master concepts as surplus populations (Li 2014), precariates, multitudes, creative classes (Ross 2009), and middle classes (Heiman, Freeman, Liechty 2012; Kalb 2015b). Even about working classes (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014). And they do so, ever more comparatively, against the densely historicized and variably neoliberalized contexts of postsocialist, postcolonial, and post-welfare state/post-Fordist spaces.

Reflecting those transformations, the current anthropologically inflected concept of class refuses to be infatuated with the supposed 'groupness' of earlier class concepts, just as it refutes a classic place based research strategy. It also seems to refuse to talk in any analytically 'high-brow' way about this or that class doing this or that: reification, essentialism and reductionism are abhorred (Kalb 1997). Nor does it seek to analytically prioritize relationships of exploitation and inequality in production and through wage labor. Class, in anthropology these days, refers broadly to mechanisms of exploitation and extraction operative in the relationships of daily social reproduction (Kalb 2015). These then are the proverbial and fast changing relationships that people have to enter into, willy-nilly, in order to reproduce their lives, live and give life, and do so day to day in situated habitats, as biographical pasts move toward projected and desired futures. These can be the classical relationships of labor, as people are compelled to seek highly variable forms and paths of waged employment in order to survive. But they also refer to crucial aspects of the relationships of citizenship to and within neoliberalizing states, states which seem inevitably geared to pushing up the productivity of people under their jurisdiction in the face of the dictates of global capital accumulation, thus hollowing out the fictions of popular sovereignty once so important for mid-twentieth century ideas of sovereignty and emancipation. They also concern education and child-care. They are about cities as speculative investment-driven machines for the generation (or contestation) of rents extracted from lived forms of social inequality; and increasingly in particular also about people's direct relationships to finance: their relationships of indebtedness through housing, consumption, education etc. Concepts such as neoliberalism, gentrification, dispossession/repossession, disenfranchisement, and governmentality have been proposed to identify key properties and mechanisms of these accumulation driven processes.

Class then, informs an anthropological research agenda that seeks to conceptualize as well as to discover the socially structured and identifiable contradictions of and within livelihoods and solidarities as they unfold over space and time within the orbit of increasingly capitalized, and therefore highly mortgaged, habitats<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> What is not worked out in this proposal, for reasons of space, is the issue of class, kinship and family ('reproduction' in the empiricist sense). Again, this merits a further elaboration, also in relation to the 'frontlines of value' notion.

### B3: 21<sup>st</sup> century Capitalism as an ethnographic object

This theoretical agenda is generated and inspired by a specific historical context, the ongoing social transformations of and within global capitalism. The literature in anthropology and beyond is clear about the broad outlines. Here are some of those, without effort to be comprehensive: 1) accelerated urbanization and slum formation in the Third World and China as peasants and indigenous peoples become dispossessed migratory workers; 2) variegated polarization of populations in the Global North, urban gentrification paired with informalization of labor and housing markets lower down the scale; 3) in various spaces but not all: cosmopolitanization of governing classes, re-ethnification of working and lower middle classes, diasporization and the formation of 'classes dangereuses' among the relative surplus populations; 4) accelerating migratory flows everywhere, producing classic territorial problems of crowding out, downward pressure on wages, housing, and public services as a result of intensified competition, and consequent identity politics both among migrants and among 'autochthonous' populations; 5) large scale classic industrial working class formation and middle class formation in China, but not or much less so elsewhere; 6) Stark bifurcations among the actual or imagined urban 'middle class', which is becoming both a strong ideological category, a popular desire as well as an 'angst', shot through with increasing contradictions; 7) Accelerating tendencies within the valorization of capital toward financialization, securitization, 'fictitious accumulation', speculation, monopolistic rent-seeking, and consequently a stepped up search for new technological-social-spatial fixes, pushing up time-space compressions to unprecedented levels.

Any of these general processes ought to be studied ethnographically in their situated historical concreteness, while the globalized abstracted nature of the mechanisms in play must continually be kept in the eye. These are classical 'back and forth' movements among theory and ethnography. But while this project sees all of this as significant context, its real punch lies elsewhere.

The originality of the current project resides in its interrogation of some of such processes through a particular prism, the prism of what could be called the '*frontlines of value*'. Frontlines of value<sup>3</sup> are here defined as the 'critical junctions' (Kalb 2005, 2011), the multi-scalar nexuses, which connect advanced forms of capital accumulation with stark popular desires. They are the contact points between new forms of capitalist value generation on the one hand, and the search for cultural value formation by popular constituencies on the other. These are therefore frontlines of value in a double sense: from below they appear as the relational domains and practices that represent among the most desired forms of life within capitalism seen from a specific habitat and level of aspiration; from above they appear as among the most promising socio-spatial-technical fixes for a financialized capitalism constantly in danger of deflation, devaluation, and a lack of popular legitimacy. The frontlines are where the aspirations of the popular and of capital meet. And they are indeed frontlines: lines of friction and confrontation. It is suspected that they are in and of themselves contradictory

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<sup>3</sup> For reasons of space the concept of 'value' is not further elaborated here, less so than the concept of class is. It deserves a full discussion of its own.

and, minimally potentially, in some of their moments and dimensions, generative of public or private antagonisms.

Frontlines of value, then, can become objects of historico-ethnographic inquiry if they are methodologically constructed as spatiotemporally defined relational *sites* for the study of class and accumulation. Such spatiotemporal relational sites bring situated agency and public or private 'events' together with regulation (states, civil society etc) and accumulation. Methodologically speaking, our frontlines are windows onto multiscalar and interstitial dynamic relationships (see below). Here are some examples of '*frontline sites*' that could potentially serve the goals of the project (but see below):

- 1) The notion of '*creative industries*' is associated with the making of '*creative classes*' (Florida 2005; Ross 2009). Creative classes encompass 'knowledge workers' such as IT workers, software engineers, industrial designers, architects as well as academics, artists and musicians. It is a sector that is essential for the transition from a developing economy/emergent market to a mature and developed one. They are also crucial assets for capital as it seeks to move up the ladder of added value and solve some of its crisis tendencies. 'Creative classes' also epitomize the popular desires projected onto late capitalist modernity on the overworked notion of the middle class, as they seem to unproblematically align income, purchasing power, security, autonomy, and creativity (Kalb 2015 b). To paraphrase Albert Hirschman: all the goods of capitalism at once. The urban rebellions in Russia against Putin in 2011/12 explicitly articulated themselves as protests of the creative classes, as did the 'umbrella revolution' in Hong Kong in 2014. Those rebellions expressed the contradictions of 'actually existing creative classes' in Russia and China as they ran amok against perceived authoritarian forms of rule embedded in their post-socialist trajectories toward capitalism. At the same time, in Berlin, a famous location for creative classes in Europe, their average income turns out to be less than the social minimum. The segments of those classes that are less or not at all involved in corporate capitalism or in the higher echelons of the public services, such as artists, musicians, and younger academics, meanwhile, are perennially crowded out of urban space as their bohemian local cultures are instrumentalized by urban planners in the pursuit of increased real estate values, gentrification, and tax income for local authorities - from Amsterdam to Budapest, New York to San Francisco. While such cultural producers seem to rely on a rich urban commons, including affordable public education and social housing sectors, much of those commons are in the process of being privatized or otherwise being neoliberalized and 'enclosed'. From Oakland to Barcelona, the younger 'creative classes' have associated themselves with the new social movements and Left wing party formations against austerity and 'structural reform'. Creative industries and creative classes, then, allow for the identification of exciting sites for the situated study of the contradictions of middle class formation and precariatization in the context of capitalist restructuring, in particular in the Global North, including China.

- 2) An extravagant 'frontline site' is formed by the nexus between global capital accumulation and surplus populations, in particular but not only in Southern and Central Africa. Pharmacology is one of the hot spots of capital accumulation, with steadily upward pushing stock market valuations. It is also a substantial part of the global economy. As its profitability and valuations are increasingly dependent on life-style medicines for the 'greying' higher middle classes in the Global North, it is relying ever more on widespread test networks for those life-style medicines among the surplus populations of the Global South. Similarly, the fast spread of smartphones throughout the Global South, Africa in particular again, has created a large pool of people involved in local repairs. These experienced workers now sometimes know more about some of the inner workings of the technology than the trained engineers in the North. They are therefore often brought informally into the networks of the corporations to generate further surplus value for them. Here again contradictory frontlines: in this case between surplus populations in the Global South and global capital accumulation.
  
- 3) 'The Right to the City' in fast urbanizing societies such as China and India is another frontline of value. Global and local accumulation depends on the making of working classes but simultaneously also on the reproduction and replenishment of sufficient 'reserve armies of labor'. Establishing oneself in a growing urban center is often both necessary and impossible for what Breman (1996) has termed 'wage hunters and gatherers'. It appears similarly contradictory to local authorities and planners, who may seek to house particular segments while regulating others down or out. This happens in China among others through the notorious and now fiercely contested Hukou system, and in India through ethno-political mobilization and networking, housing prices, and policing.

These examples are meant as mere suggestions for the construction of 'frontline sites'. The ultimate selection of sites must be left to the researchers, based on their local knowledge, and will reach articulation during systematic brainstorming seminars in the first year of the project. Here they are merely meant to give an idea of how the project will try to wring key class dynamics of 21<sup>st</sup> century global capitalism into researchable ethnographic objects. The project will thus integrate the abstractions of capitalist value extraction and the concreteness of situated lived lives into one multiscalar and dynamic perspective, thereby making their specific friction-ridden conjunctions visible in analytic descriptions and extended case studies.

In the context of the capitalist globalizations of the last decades, anthropology has struggled to reinvent the relevance of its place-based methodology of fieldwork. Anthropological political economy has suggested to contextualize place-making, rather than just places, against their dynamic insertions in the evolving world-system (Mintz 1985; Nash 1980; Roseberry 1988; Wolf 1982). The critique against the world systemic option was, among others, that the world system became too much of an over-determining factor in those studies - though anthropological political economy's turn toward history was more widely appreciated (Marcus and Fisher 1985). 'Multi-sited' methods later proposed to

'follow' the paths of circulation of objects, people and ideas (Marcus 1995). Multi-sited methods, however, failed to theorize which objects and which circulations would be significant, and why, and left researchers blindfolded in their need for selection and argumentation.

The method developed for this project diverges from the latter two by consciously seeking a multi-scalar perspective on 'critical junctions' of class, accumulation and value. The assumption is that multi-scalar methodologies will facilitate a reinvigoration of anthropological theory by allowing both the accentuation of situated and therefore relatively contingent historical properties of cases – 'local values' - and universalizing insights about the relationships and mechanisms of surplus value generation and extraction within the abstractions of global capital accumulation, while both are seen as intensely intermingled empirically. Another way to describe this particular methodological approach against the background of the history of anthropological theory and method is to see it as a particular aligning of the 'extended case study' approach of the Manchester school (see Kapferer's Egalitarianism ERC project) with Eric Wolf's macro-historical anthropology. It also finds inspiration in Michael Burawoy's 'global ethnography' school (Burawoy et. al. 2001; see also Kalb and Halmai 2011).

In the following, an idea of the implementation and expected outcomes of the project will be given.

### **C) Implementation and work plan**

The project will aim to unlock the potential for class-oriented research in ongoing projects at the department, such as the Egalitarianism project (Kapferer and Rio), the Energetics project of Knudsen, and the 'De-naturalizing difference' project. The team will draw on the energy for research generated by these projects and contribute further to it.

#### **C1: Recruitment and Division of Labor:**

The project team will consist of a PI and three postdocs. Postdocs will be working on areas of their own specialization. The project envisions one location in Europe (the PI), one in China, one in the global south (Southern Africa, South Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East). Other locations can be proposed too, as long as the proposals respond in inspiring ways to the call. The regional spread of the project must answer to an effort to map the insertions of significant world regions into global capitalism so as to capture some of the latter's key regional properties and differentiations. Europe, as an old 'post-industrializing' fully urbanized core, and China, as the new industrial workshop of the world annex fastest urbanizing landscape, are key. One more classical 'Third world', 'development' location, and one organized around resource nationalism in the Middle East, for example, would help to cover the regional cartography of capital to allow for more universalizing visions.



On recruitment: The PI is well embedded in international networks, in particular in anthropological political economy, and has an excellent track record in attracting top-notch collaborators.

The call will ask for proposals that identify and describe particular 'Frontline Sites' that are emblematic for particular regional insertions into global accumulation and value generation and should be of sufficient (as well as surprising) theoretical value. Postdocs will be recruited on the basis of their own project formulation and the way that formulation responds to the goal of the program as a whole.

### C2: Build up of the program

The team will, collectively and individually, present its work on a regular basis, and throughout the funding period, at all the major international conferences for anthropologists such as AAA, EASA, IUAES. To foster interdisciplinarity, it will also consider to present at the worldwide ISA and IIS conferences, for example. The proposal of sessions on the 'Class, Value, and Social Transformation' theme to all these forums will be actively pursued, also in collaboration with similarly oriented researchers/teams elsewhere (such as at Financialization/MPI – Halle, or GRECO/Barcelona, for example). The Norwegian and Scandinavian conferences will be used for presenting the team's work as well.

### Year 1:

The 'Frontlines' project has scheduled its first year for a series of workshops, consultations and collective brainstorming sessions in Bergen, among others with visiting researchers, that will help to lay down the theoretical framework for the team and verse the individual researchers in its finesses. First fieldwork explorations/preparations of maximum two months are foreseen. By the end of that year, robust project outlines for each project within the program will be finalized and theoretically, conceptually, operationally synchronized. Each of these outlines could be further worked out over time for an ERC 'Starter' or otherwise grant application. The key task of the first year is the development of a common theoretical language for the analysis of regionally disparate multi-scalar cases, with the goal of facilitating simultaneous universalization, comparison, and specification of those cases. Another new feature of the program is that each 'regional project' will prepare for two or three case studies within its region. Thus, the regional studies will not consist of single case studies, but of a selection of (probably maximally three) significant 'Frontline' cases. The team will spend considerable time identifying local partners (researchers located within respective university systems) and identifying and training local researchers. The ins and outs of this will need to be developed by the team in the first months.

### Year 2 + 3:

Year two and three are reserved mainly for fieldwork (8 – 10 months per year) and for the first drafting of case studies. These drafts will be discussed in the team as the team gathers in Bergen each year before and after the summer recess, and will be fine-tuned, revised and submitted for publication during the project. These Bergen gatherings during the fieldwork period will also feature

workshops or lectures by visiting researchers. By the end of year three, the first series of publications should have been realized or be close to being so. These publications might be empirically and/or theoretically driven. All members of the team will visit each regional location together and discuss the work that is being done in and on that region. These team visits will be productive brainstorming sessions in and of themselves and will help to flash out a vocabulary for comparison, universalization and specification.

#### Year 4 + 5

Years four and five will be dedicated to a) writing out and writing up; b) dissemination and publication; c) the elaboration of follow up proposals by each team member. These will, like year 1, be years in which the team is collectively located in Bergen (with the exception of shorter follow-up field trips of particular members, if so required).

All members will produce a series of (circa 5) internationally peer-reviewed articles throughout the project, accelerating in the final two years. They will also each finish a monograph submitted to an international academic publisher. The closing conference (in Bergen) will also lead to an edited collection that will be submitted to a top international publisher.

To facilitate the worldwide dissemination of the results of the team one or two workshops will be held/sponsored (and possibly co-sponsored by the Wenner Grenn Foundation or Guggenheim etc) about the general theme of 'Class, Value, and Social Transformations in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism' in selected world-exposed and world-exposing locations such as New York etc.

All members of the team will be encouraged to develop and submit ERC or similar proposals in year 4 or 5, capitalizing upon their own research and the comprehensive theoretical and methodological push of the Frontlines Program as such. The PI will submit an ERC Advanced Grant in year 4, so as to consolidate the UiB investment.

The team will, finally, consider whether and how it would facilitate the making of a professional video/film production (a documentary) about the 'Frontlines of Value and Accumulation'.

#### **D) Outcomes (summary):**

The PI will complete two monographs plus a series of theoretical and empirical research articles published in the leading journals of the discipline. One monograph will be a case study (location Europe); the other will be a generalizing global publication in the tradition of Eric Wolf's 'Europe and the People Without History' (1982), summarizing the insights of the project as a whole and drawing extensively on further literature. An edited collection coming out of the closing conference will also be produced.

The postdocs will each write a monograph plus several research articles (the aim is 5).