Special Issue on Jane Guyer's *Marginal Gains*: *Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*

Introduction: *Marginal Gains* Revisited

Peter Geschiere, Mitzi Goheen, and Charles Piot

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE is the condensation of an author-meets-critics double panel organized for the African Studies Association meeting in Washington, D.C., in November 2005, on Jane Guyer's challenging book *Marginal Gains—Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*.[1] The book was published in the first half of 2004, and when the three of us met in the fall of that year, we all felt it was a text that lent itself especially well to such a session. One of the elements that makes the book so compelling is Guyer's particular style of theorizing: Starting from a painstaking effort to discover regular patterns in empirical data, she moves to the positing and testing of theoretical notions—but in a way that does not strive to produce closure or systematicity. On the contrary, the book can sometimes be confusing because it leaves so much open. But precisely because Guyer continues to create new openings, it is an inspiring piece of work, constantly offering novel starting points for further research and reflection.

Of course there are also many other reasons, more directly related to

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the contents and main directions of Guyer's explorations, that discussing her work is so challenging and enriching. In our call for papers for the Washington panels we especially emphasized the relevance of Guyer's approach for trying to make sense of African economies—which for many Western observers seem to have surpassed the threshold of comprehension. Indeed, a central idea in her book is that the hegemonic nature of current (neoclassical) models of economic thinking risks making researchers (anthropologists included) blind to alternative forms of rationality and valuation that are developing in a context of constant crisis in a place like West Africa (as well as elsewhere in the world). Basic tenets of economic thinking, such as the assumption that combined processes of monetization and commoditization must result in ever-expanding commensuration through ever more uniform standards of valuation, tend to obfuscate the fact that in many parts of the world trends that defy such assumptions manifest themselves. In many parts of Africa, for instance, different standards of valuation and different forms of money have long functioned next to one another. To wit, even in postcolonial times, the prevailing forms of "soft money" have remained so volatile that people must learn to switch constantly from one standard to another. Indeed, right up to the present day central authorities hardly succeed in imposing a standardization of value. Of course, even in other parts of the world where such standardization is occurring, it remains a much more incomplete process than is generally assumed. Yet in many parts of Africa this is especially the case. It is striking, then, as Guyer shows with a wealth of diverse examples, that participants often do not see this as a weakness. On the contrary, she maintains, it is their ability to bridge enduring disjunctures that allows actors to realize the "marginal gains" that are crucial to these economies. Underneath apparent chaos there is regularity in the particular ways in which people strive to link different standards of valuation in a gainful way.

In our call for papers we suggested also—albeit more implicitly—that

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Chiefdom of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. Her research and publications focus on political economy, national-local/regional political connections, and gender in this region. Her publications include *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in Highland Cameroon* [University of Wisconsin Press, 1996], as well as numerous articles, book chapters, and co-edited books on these topics. Her most recent field research is focused on expanded global horizons, new visions of life trajectories, and the growing emphasis on the occult among the youth of Northwest Cameroon.

Charles Piot is an associate professor in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and the Department of African and African American Studies at Duke University. His research focuses on the political economy and history of rural West Africa. His recent book, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), attempts to retheorize a classic out-of-the-way location as existing within the modern and the global.

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this search for alternative ways of organizing the economy might be clarifying not only for those who try to correct the view of Africa as "a hopeless continent" (as expressed in *The Economist*, December 9–16, 2000), but also for scholars who focus on economic developments in core areas of the world system. There as well, modern "risk"—or "finance"—capitalism seems to be marked by uncertainties and a playing on disjunctures (witness the vital role of money traders in the highly unstable dollar/euro market around 2002 and the inability of any central authority to control this) that are not that different from Guyer's examples from West Africa.[2] Even economists are now prepared to recognize that in hypercapitalist formations, valuation is determined only to a limited extent by "the" market. Indeed, it is certainly not only in Africa that valuation is a highly politicized process. The question is therefore to what extent Guyer's inspired search for regularities in everyday economic behavior that must feed theory (instead of the other way around) can help fill in the huge blank spots that economists, with their model-making, risk leaving open. For truly "modern" economic configurations as well, the myth-making around the central role of "the market" obscures all sorts of economic behavior that follows alternative rationalities.

All of this opens up quite challenging perspectives. Could Guyer's original starting points—such as her attention to disjunctures in processes of valuation and the importance of expertise in playing on such disjunctures (instead of trying to erase them)—help to interest economists in anthropological research? One of the unfortunate outcomes of the old debate in economic anthropology between substantivists and formalists was that it tended to divide the world in two: while the substantivists' point that the market was "embedded" in social structures might seem justified in certain areas of the world (like Africa), this only seemed to reaffirm the formalists' belief in the autonomy of "the market" in other, more "developed" parts.[3] Today regions like Africa are still the despair of development economists because their models appear unable to account for African economic realities. However, even in capitalist core countries—where economic volatility is more and more common and "conjunctures" that were supposed to last for several decades now seem to follow each other in a few years—Guyer's insights into alternative ways of handling crisis and disjuncture might be of interest to economists. Hence our hope that this special issue might contribute further to opening up a dialogue between the two disciplines.

Of course, there are many other points in Guyer's book that offer starting points for further research and debate. The contributions below offer a rich sampling of this. The first three elaborate upon various historical trends in relation to Guyer's interpretations. Sarah Berry (57–70) develops the central idea from *Marginal Gains* that economic values are situational and the outcome of highly complex economic strategies—not only in Africa but elsewhere as well. James Ferguson (71–86), following a line of argument similar to Guyer's, analyzes official plans for instituting a "Basic

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Income Grant" in South Africa, and shows how this can overcome the "tired 'neoliberalism versus welfare state' frame" (84). Peter Geschiere (43–56) discusses variations within West Africa that make any binary contrast of economics in "Africa" versus "the West" highly problematic; indeed, it is striking that Guyer's central criteria for difference play such a significant role in the ethnic stereotypes that beset the region.

The next two contributions, by Akanmu Adebayo (87–110) and Karin Barber (111–24), focus on developments in southern Nigeria, the locus of several examples central to Guyer's argumentation in *Marginal Gains*—and, moreover, a part of the continent that seems to be at the forefront of novel developments (both economic and cultural) in Africa in general. Adebayo offers an interesting comparison between the development of rank and inequality among the Yoruba (Nigeria) and the Akan (Ghana)—both viewed first in a long-term historical perspective, and subsequently in relation to recent moments of particularly incisive economic instability and vertiginous currency devaluation. Barber elaborates upon Guyer's general idea of "the productivity of the interface" (111) by taking it into new domains like the production of new artistic genres and changing patterns of subjectivation. She focuses on specific developments in "Atlantic Africa" as a region deeply affected by the slave trade: on emerging traits of praise songs among the Yoruba, and on novel parameters in the convertability of human beings in the Niger Delta.

The last four texts concern more general, theoretical aspects of Guyer's approach. Bill Maurer (125–38) follows up on Guyer's emphasis that, despite processes of monetization, calculative rationality continues to play a limited role and does not necessarily subsume other forms of valuation, as is generally (but often implicitly) assumed. Focusing on off-shore financing and notably the Grey Money Amnesty in South Africa (2003–2004), Maurer shows how important this argument is for understanding contemporary forms of financing and the crucial role of "social payments" (rather than market logics) in this context as well. Chris Udry and Hyungi Woo (139–53) take one of Guyer's examples of the situational character of processes of valuation further: the fact that statistics on Ghanaian households do not follow Engel's Law (according to which rising levels of total expenditure must lead to a decline in the percentage spent on food) is compared with data on other regions in Africa. Udry and Woo posit three seminal hypotheses as to why Engel's Law does not work here. Janet Roitman (155–61) elaborates upon Guyer's "polysemic" notion of gain—as not purely economic—and more generally upon her approach to gaining a new understanding of certain economic presuppositions or concepts as emerging from "experience in the world." How can we generalize from this sort of "hermeneutics of the economic subject" (158)? Finally, Helen Verran (163–82) approaches Guyer's work in terms of recent efforts by philosophers of science to arrive at more differentiated theories of values than those of market economics. She closes in a very appropriate way

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by outlining further possibilities in Guyer's—and the philosopher Michel Callon's—empirical approach.

In preparing this special issue we were confronted with another implication of Guyer's empiricism as a challenging mode of theorizing. Her reluctance to attempt some sort of closure to her explorations, and her preference for continuing to work from empirical patterns in order to reinterpret current economic concepts, made it quite difficult for us, as editors, to provide the kind of commentary that would accomplish further convergence among the papers that had been presented at the Washington meeting. Clearly, in this line of theorizing, this requires a kind of intuitive searching that can only come after a very deep immersion in the issues raised by the book. Or to put it more straightforwardly, we realized that we did not yet have the kind of intuition that would do justice to the riches of *Marginal Gains*. So we were very happy when Jane Guyer herself offered to comment on the various papers and to close this issue with a response (183–202) bringing together the different strands emerging from the contributions. At the Washington panels she had already done an impressive job of relating papers that at first blush seemed quite disparate. In her contribution to this special issue she succeeds in taking further the questions emerging from the various contributions.

This special issue certainly does not claim to arrive at some sort of closure around all the openings suggested by *Marginal Gains*. But we do hope it helps in outlining coherent starting points for research that can overcome the view of African economies as "beyond the threshold of comprehension"—and, even more, that it highlights the relevance of the margins for a more nuanced understanding of economics in general.

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Notes

1. Unfortunately Charles Piot's paper could not be published here, but Karin Barber and Helen Verran, who did not present papers at the panel, joined us for this special issue.
2. This is a point also made by Jean and John Comaroff (2000).
3. See Dilley (1992).

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