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DEBTS AND INDEBTEDNESS IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK

Written by Catherine L. Sanders

Anyone who has traveled without a tour guide has experienced at least the potential of putting themselves at the mercy of strangers. Often, it's inevitable and startling and can be catastrophic, but ultimately helps restore one's faith in humanity. However, anthropologists who often spend over a year in their remote fieldsites extend that moment for the duration of their stay. Over time, we become a burden on our research subjects. Aside from being, at first, completely inept and ignorant at local customs, even our clumsy attempts to help may make our hosts' days longer and more arduous.

One day during recent fieldwork in a Himalayan village in Nepal, I was walking down the path from my abode to the place in the village where I could charge my computer, when I saw a young girl chasing after a calf that was confused and running down the wrong path toward me. I could have just stepped aside and let the girl corral her own cow, darn it, but I was so tired of feeling useless all the time, and I thought, "Hey, this is something I can do", so I got in the way of the cow. But instead of going the way it was supposed to, it ran in the wrong direction up a steep slope. Now feeling like I needed to see this through, I went after it, caught it, and tried pushing it toward the girl. Okay, I'm not much of a livestock wrangler at home either, so my way of directing cow traffic didn't sit well with the calf. It turned, took a running start, and rammed me. It only rammed me in the thigh because it was that young, but I nearly fell over. By this time a small crowd had gathered and we were all laughing our heads off, but the vindictive calf backed up, took another run, rammed me again, and just kept on ramming me until I was almost over a cliff. Finally, the mother of the girl gained her composure enough to come rescue me. From a baby cow.

I'm writing about indebtedness today because I'm in serious debt to the people of Nepal. They had to feed me, teach me how to behave, and rescue me from baby cows for over a year. Some of those things you can pay for with money, but money doesn't begin to touch most of them, and here's why: being indebted in Nepal means placing a social contract alongside the money. Resources are so scarce there, and conditions so harsh that villagers take on each others' debt in a loosely rotating system. They know that the one certitude is that their day will come, tomorrow most likely. Being in debt is saying, "when and if I can, I will be there for you, too". This terrified me. I didn't know if I would be there for them, or even if I was, if I could offer them anything. I had been studying the impacts of western development projects, and they were looking nearly as costly as not offering anything. But I also knew that participating in an intentional social contract was the absolute biggest gift I had in me. My name is Catherine Sanders, and I am in debt to the people of Nepal. I will never be able to pay it back. And I will never give up trying.

Debt is a decidedly social phenomenon (see M. Mauss, *The Gift*, 1967). Here in the US, we call morality into question when people cannot pay their debts (see also D. Graeber, *Debt: The first 5000 years*, 2001), as when the housing market dropped from under us in 2009 and the rest of the economy landed in piles of rubble up to our earlobes. Suddenly, all the ickiness we, as Americans, have felt all along about being in debt gained a momentum that had been building under the surface for quite some time. "Those people" should not have borrowed so much money. They caused this with

their fiscal irresponsibility, and now they are making us pay. Debt is so complicated in the current American psyche because it is rife with social paradox. Our country is founded on notions of self-reliance that preclude fiscal dependence on others or the government. Nowhere was this more clear than at this past Republican National Convention in Tampa, where the convention hall rang with mantras like "We built this" and "We can change it". And yet, we pride ourselves on building more, and bigger, and stronger than anyone else. Often, this requires us to borrow from moneylenders and dig a financial hole we're not positive we will be able to leap out of. It's American to spend, but it's also immoral not to succeed.

Truth is, I fear debt above anything else, because debt means owing someone something, being dependent. It also means that at some point in the future, I will be called upon to pay my debts, and since I've never accumulated any capital, I'm uncertain of future success. I am sure I am not alone in this aversion to debt. When we place our burdens on anonymous institutions instead of friends and family, the inequalities between the haves and have-nots loom larger. Debt becomes connected to shame and dependency. However, where blame is not the default, debt, it turns out, is just a promise. Further, it is evidence of our participation in the communities in which we live. Where it gets coercive or morally indicting is where the social aspects are obscured, and the power differentials between debtors and creditors are too great.

In the US, social debts are even more terrifying, perhaps, because of our inability to quantify them. The people I lived with in Nepal may ask me for anything, and by our tacit contract, I owe them their requests. Americans may be due to revisit their knee-jerk reaction to indebtedness, though. About halfway through my fieldwork, I left the village for a stint in Kathmandu. Upon my return a month later, I was surprised to find the villagers treated me more like family. I had already gone a long way towards fulfilling my contract, just by coming back as promised; by being there, and later, telling the stories of their struggles to my own people. Sometimes indebtedness costs us as little as this.

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