

## Forum

*New World of Gain: Europeans, Guaraní, and the Global Origins of Modern Economy.* By BRIAN P. OWENSBY. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. 378 pages. LCCN 2021013025. \$140 hardback, \$35 paperback.

It is rare when an author can take a history rife with extensive intellectual canon and gushing hagiography and still manage to posit original, lucid, and substantiated insights, but Brian Owensby has managed to offer new understandings of the extended interactions between different groups of colonizing Europeans and the Indigenous Guaraní during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries in his book *New World of Gain*. Owensby adroitly prioritizes Indigenous resistance and agency in his account of the historical economic encounter between Westerners and Native peoples of the Americas, resulting in a model with relevance beyond historical studies of present-day Paraguay and Argentina. *New World of Gain* leans heavily on a theoretical framework from Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* and augments the eighty-one-year-old paradigm with analyses of historical European documents and interpretations from more recent ethnographies and linguistic studies of the Guaraní.<sup>1</sup> Owensby's core argument is that whereas exchange practices among South American gift-giving Natives and profit-minded Spanish colonists were fundamentally antithetical (and the source of rampant intercultural misunderstandings and strife), deeply ingrained Guaraní concepts of reciprocity were in fact aligned with formative Jesuit ideals regarding the common good through charity, leading to mutually beneficial interactions. His wide-ranging research shows how exchange-based distinctions between the Indigenous population, Spanish profiteers, and European Jesuits were far more than economic; they were culturally enmeshed, inseparably linked with other aspects of life, and deeply ingrained in worldview and cosmological differences.

*New World of Gain* presents the story of Guaraní interaction with invading Europeans chronologically. Owensby's first chapter depicts Guaraní and European worlds before their initial encounters in the sixteenth century, contrasting Indigenous communal solidarity, abundance, and equity with the emphasis on gain inherent to burgeoning European commercial capitalism. It is followed by a chapter on the ill-fated initial economic exchanges between the Spaniards and Guaraní, highlighted by Owensby's extended analysis of how European colonists were quick to capitalize on Native gifts of kindred women, but refused to reciprocate and follow Indigenous norms by acknowledging affinal duties and working for their new Guaraní brothers-in-law (or *tobaya*). The third and fourth chapters detail numerous conflicts—between settlers and Natives, within Guaraní society, between different colonial factions under the Spanish monarchy, and even among and between religious and secular factions in Europe—as Indigenous women became the Europeans' preferred exploitable resource in the region. Chapter five explains how particularly ascetic clerics rose to power in this area of South America by establishing missions that combatted unfettered settler greed and “represented an emergent

<sup>1</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

mutual commitment between Guaraní and the Jesuits to the solidarity of avoiding predation and responding to bodily needs of sustenance and security, grounded in distinct but resonant ideas regarding human sociality” (p. 150). Owensby’s sixth chapter reveals how the geopolitics of Spain’s war with Portugal and the consequent 1750 Treaty of Madrid resulted in significant cessions of Spanish South American territories with Jesuit missions to Portugal, the expulsion of these clerics, and the dissolution of any religious pact with the Indigenous population based on gift-giving, reciprocity, or the common good. The next chapter details the freefall of these colonies into a morally corrosive economy of exploitation, self-interest, and profiteering, most of which was at the expense of the Guaraní and their ancestral homeland. Owensby’s final chapter explores how Western authors subsequently retold the history of Paraguay in the nineteenth century with little regard for accuracy or authenticity in order to serve their own political and philosophical purposes. He solemnly concludes: “In Europe’s new lattice of sensibilities, the Western mind had moved on to a triumphal mode of historical reflection capable of recognizing only the staid procession of a world of gain long in the making—leaving society, and those who might still insist on it, to the margins of moral and practical reason” (p. 292).

*New World of Gain* is at its best when exposing the dynamic historical rise of a profit-driven mercantile mindset in Europe and the incompatibility of this economic system with both Indigenous lifeways and Jesuit ideals. Owensby’s explanation of tensions within the Old World as the obsession with gain and profit began to overwhelm time-honored religious moralities of communality and the greater good is especially poignant. *New World of Gain* also makes important contributions regarding Native resistance, the inextricability of economic, historical, and cultural factors within each of the given societies being discussed, and the distinctive nuances between different European religious orders involved in missionization. Scholars researching other areas of the world and different time periods will likely recognize meaningful parallels in their work—Indigenous adoption of colonizers as a strategic gift that is unrequited by Europeans,<sup>2</sup> broader political factors disrupting local gift-based alliances,<sup>3</sup> competing economic and religious priorities in multicultural proselytization settings,<sup>4</sup> etc.—and be open to the hemispheric applicability of Owensby’s theory of economic encounter.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Mamanatowick Powhatan’s ritualized death ceremony for John Smith at Werowocomoco (near James Fort, Virginia) in 1607 that involved Matoaka’s (Pocahontas’) intervention, Smith’s consequent adoption by the Powhatan, and Smith’s refusal to move the English fortified settlement as a cacique in the Powhatan chiefdom in Seth Mallios, *The Deadly Politics of Giving: Exchange and Violence at Ajacan, Roanoke, and Jamestown* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 87–90.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see the shift in the balance of power in the Indigenous Carolinas (Ossomocomuck) and the ostracization of the Roanoacs in 1586, after the Chawanoacs allied with the English settlers, in Mallios, *The Deadly Politics of Giving*, 68–73.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see the tension between Father Segura and Father Carrera in outfitting the mission at Ajacan in 1570, specifically in Segura’s insistence that the venture have no soldiers and no clerics with previous experience, which was an allusion to avaricious tendencies that had run amok in more southern areas of La

While a strength of this text is in its broad and overarching view of historical events impacted by evolving geopolitical dynamics, a byproduct of this framing is that the book occasionally leaves the specific individuals involved in the micro-encounters between the Guaraní and the European colonists nameless and faceless. Accordingly, readers of *New World of Gain* may be left wanting to know more, especially in terms of scrutinizing its historical sources and the paucity of active Indigenous voices within, and examining the nuances of its methodological rigor for assessing historiographic veracity. Furthermore, anthropologists like me who read Owensby's text will also likely wonder about its criteria for defining and determining different kinds of exchange. We are left to wonder if Owensby defines gift exchange solely on the basis of the form of the transaction, as mutual something-for-nothing offerings, because there is limited discussion and measure of: 1) the perpetual and permanent interdependence of those involved in the transaction, 2) the like status of those involved in the transaction, and 3) the inalienability of the transacted goods. These criteria, though not mutually exclusive and frequently fluid, have been staples of anthropological investigations of gift exchange for generations.<sup>5</sup> A deeper engagement with the work of past anthropologists who studied gift exchange and societies that prioritized the accrual of debt over immediate material gain would have made *New World of Gain* even more applicable to other case studies from around the globe and across time.

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Florida (Mallios, *The Deadly Politics of Giving*, 40–43, 114–15; Mallios, “The Apotheosis of Ajacan’s Jesuit Missionaries,” *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 2 (2007): 223–44).

<sup>5</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1922); Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” *L’Année sociologique* 1 (1923–1924): 30–186; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship (Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté)*, rev. ed., ed. Rodney Needham, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972); Frederick H. Damon, “The Kula and Generalised Exchange: Considering Some Unconsidered Aspects of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*,” *Man* 15, no. 2 (1980): 267–92; C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London: Academic Press, 1982); Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91; Nancy D. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Pierre Bourdieu, “Selections from *The Logic of Practice*,” in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 190–230.