

## 'The only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell':

### Towards An Anthropology of Selling

*Jamie Cross and Luke Heslop*

CHARLEY: Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that.

What does it mean to sell something? What does it mean to be a seller of things?

What does anthropology know about selling and what can selling tell us about life in precarious times?

In thinking through these questions, this special issue seeks to rejuvenate an anthropological engagement with selling as a cultural practice or social relationship, and with communities of people for whom selling is a form of work or labour. Rather than pit a critically engaged anthropology of economy against sales craft, we set out to consider what anthropology can do for selling and people who sell.

In French, Spanish and Portuguese the verb to sell is derived from its Latin root – *vendere* – which could mean to sell or advertise but also to recommend or to betray. In modern English the verb to sell has a Germanic root, *sellan*, with its earliest recorded usage meaning to 'give up', or to hand something over voluntarily in response to a request'. In reflecting on the meaning and act of selling in other languages across diverse global contexts - Poland, Turkey, Syria, India and Sri Lanka - the five contributors to this special issue all approach the moment of sale as a decisive moment: the moment in which markets are made. Rather than presume to know in advance what kinds of ethics and interests underpin the moment of sale, they ask how selling allows people to perform themselves as moral actors? In doing

so, they engage with the language and rhetoric of selling, the gendered production of salespeople, the ethics and moralities of selling, the materiality of selling and the precariousness of selling in contexts of economic uncertainty. New and renewed attention to these questions put selling back into a critical anthropology of markets and capitalist economy, refocusing our attention on 'the vender' as a crucial agent of contemporary social, political and economic transformations.

**'The only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell,'**

This special issue takes its cue from a line in Arthur Miller's classic play 'Death of a Salesman'. 'The only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell,' Charley - the successful neighbourhood businessman tells Willy Loman, the striving, everyman. As any school textbook or exam guide can explain to first time readers, we never really know what Willy Loman sells but he spends most of the play trying to sell himself, his visions and dreams, his wisdom and experience, to his sons, Biff and Happy, and his wife, Linda.

The door to door salesman has a powerful place in narratives of 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo American capitalism. If the expansion of electricity networks, grids of wires and pylons pillions saw the market rolled out across the country (Hughes 1983), the arrival of the door to door salesman brought the market across the porch and into the home. In Arthur Miller's work, however, the salesman was not a rugged or heroic individual - a 20<sup>th</sup> century cowboy, corralling a potential customer into a sale. Instead, Miller's salesman was an ambivalent figure, a small town businessman skilled at the art of selling but left vulnerable, insecure and precarious by the practice of the art, and by rapid transformations in post war America. Just as suburban development created new opportunities for door to door selling, the growth of automobile ownership and the rise of the self-service retail outlets, the supermarket, presented new challenges to their business. Nowhere are the trials and tribulations of door-to-door salesmen and the arts of selling better or more

sensitively captured than in David and Albert Maysles 1969 documentary film *Salesmen*.

If salesmen have acted as a barometer for the economy so to they have come to act as lightning rods for public anxiety at the ambivalent moralities of the market. Nowhere perhaps is this better exemplified than in the larger than life salesman Jordan Belfort, as depicted in Martin Scorsese's 2013 film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Belfort's ability to sell worthless financial futures makes him first a multi-millionaire, then a criminal, and finally a self help guru.

By contrast, Willy Loman never made a lot of money. Instead, tired and exhausted, he sinks into suicidal depression. Of course, that doesn't make his story any less relevant, necessary or compelling. As Linda tells their sons. 'His name was never in the papers. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid!'

### **'Attention must be paid!'**

'Attention must be paid!' What might it mean to pay ethnographic attention to the towering figures of small town marketplaces or the small time door to door salespeople striving to make a living in precarious and uncertain economic times. like the people that we encountered during respective periods of fieldwork in India and Sri Lanka? These are people for whom livelihood and personhood is intimately connected to the work of selling; people who may reap rewards within the context of a transaction, in the variation between how much they buy something for and how much they sell it for, but whose individual fortunes remain shaped by wider spheres of economy and society (cf. Zaloom 2006). In our fieldwork, an optimistically erected trestle table with wares atop it or a carefully prepared market stall spoke to the material and moral economies at work.

Like Willy Loman, the people we encountered did not always make much money, they were not in the papers, and they were not always the most admirable

characters that we encountered. Their everyday lives were rarely, if ever, focused on overcoming injustice or working to uplift the poor, they were not concerned with the alleviation of suffering or even with the question of what a good society might be. Yet, for us, understanding the work of selling offered new insights into moral economies of the market. In this special issue, then, we make a case for renewed attention to communities of salespeople in ways that we hope will open up new pathways for a comparative analysis of markets and market relations, laying the groundwork for a re-analysis of selling and salespeople through a comparative ethnographic focus on personhood, morality, and practice at the moment of market exchange.

Selling and salespeople sit below the surface of much anthropological writings on economy and society, even as the market place has remained an important site for ethnographic theory. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, Clifford Geertz - now remembered for launching a cultural or interpretative turn in anthropology - wrote four books on economic development in Indonesia. Included in this corpus of writing is *Peddlers and Princes*, a book that compares the entrepreneurial strategies of traders in a Javanese bazaar with those of upper caste traders in Bali. Java's bazaar economy, Geertz argued, had given rise to a culturally homogeneous group of peddlers, shopkeepers, and small-scale manufacturers who were trying to secure an improved social status in a changing society through the accumulation of wealth. For Geertz, there were clear parallels between the reformist Islam of these Javanese traders and the protestant ethic that Max Weber associated with the rise of capitalism (Weber 1958). By comparison, in princely Bali, Geertz proposed a Marxist analyses of the relationship between princely elites and peasants could be discarded and emphasized the complex interdependencies and dependencies engendered by their hierarchical relationship.

Yet in Geertz's most famous essay, 'Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight' (1987) the play of the market was peripheral. For Geertz cockfights were utterly absorbing for their audience because the bet, the game or the gamble had depth, and

they were interesting for cultural analysis because they moved beyond the realm of formal economic concerns into what he called the realm of sociological or social psychological concerns, setting the course for an interpretative turn in social and cultural anthropology. For Geertz, infamously, the Balinese cockfight is a cultural text that can be read over the shoulders of participants, and reveals this as a ritual arena for symbolic battles over status.

Amidst the cockfighting, however, Geertz had little to say about the deep play of selling. Yet, re-reading his work, the cockfight emerges as integral to many moments of sale. In footnotes to his 1987 essay Geertz emphasised the relationship between market exchange and the cockfight. 'Trade has followed the cock for centuries in rural Bali,' he noted, adding that the connection of cockfighting to markets and market sellers was very old, marked for example in inscriptions of royal edicts on stone or bronze. Moreover, he added, cockfights were widely understood as being good for trade. Indeed, as he documented, cockfights were often organised and sponsored by small groups of petty merchants under the general premise that cocks got money out of the house and made it circulate. Thus while the cockfight might operate on one level as a status bloodbath, on another it was a vital lubricant to market exchange. Indeed, we might say that it was the willingness and ability of merchants to mobilise and capitalise on the symbolic drama of the cockfight that sustained it as an institution.

Moving away from Bali, but with an eye firmly on the symbolic dimensions of social relations, the publication of *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (1979) put the market squarely in the frame of Geertz' analysis. This intensive ethnography of a single *suq* in Sefrou, Morocco, undertaken with his wife Hildred Geertz and their colleague Lawrence Rosen over six years, interpreted the bazaar as a kind of paradigmatic 'meta-symbol' for Moroccan society (Crapanzano 1981: 850). Here, the market – 'a place where half commercialized tribesmen meet super-commercialized shop keepers on free if somewhat less than equal ground' (Geertz 1979: 129) – takes center stage. 'What holds everything more

or less together in this knockabout world', Geertz claims, 'is that men want what others have and find it, normally, easier to chaffer it out of them than force it' (Geertz 1979: 197). It is the play of this chaffer which brings individual personality and charisma to bear on the moment of sale, which in turn produces the market. As Geertz' co-author Lawrence Rosen illustrates of the market, 'the free play of personality – determine, to an extraordinarily high degree, the shape and operation of everyday social life' (Rosen 1979: 20). Although the ethics of commerce are unavoidably shot through with generally understood obligations of kinship, political associations, or notions of honour, these are not always brought to bear on the moment of sale in predictable ways. In fact, as the contributor to this volume show, the moment of sale is rich with diverse and generative relational possibilities for individuals who dare to cultivate them. For Geertz, however, the moment of sale was still secondary to the ability to cultivate a network of relationships that could be long-term reliable sources of information.

In his classic study of a rural market in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, for example, Alfred Gell drew directly on Geertz's work, reading the market space as a cultural text (Gell 1982). For Gell, the market revealed the symbolic organisation of space. Here the market place is subject to a social order that originates from outwith its physical boundaries (see also, Óstór 1984), with the spatial divisions of stalls mirroring the social segregation of caste society, and interactions between buyers and sellers reproducing stereotypes of status. In the 1980s and 1990s Bloch and Parry's edited collection of essays, 'Money and the Morality of Exchange' (1989) catalysed further interest in the comparative study of markets, market actors and the circulation of money (e.g. Vidal 2000, Heslop 2016), even as the work of selling remained at the margins. Meanwhile, Daniel Miller's (1987, 1994, 1998) writings established mass consumption and the mass consumer as alternative objects of ethnographic enquiry.

In parallel, other strands of economic anthropology and sociology were beginning to pay closer attention to the work of selling. In the 1970s Keith Hart's

ethnographic research in urban Ghana in Accra (Hart 1973) drew attention to street vending as a majoritarian arena of economic activity and entrepreneurship, revealing how vendors were subject to forms of social regulation and governance even as they remained 'informalised'. This work established street sellers and hawkers in the 'informal economy' as critical market actors (e.g. Harriss White). Elsewhere, sociologists were beginning to take selling seriously. As Trevor Pinch and Colin Clark (1986, 1995) showed, in their now classic account of street salesmen in Britain the arts of selling are always deployed within a framework of social and interactional rules, which are shared by the person selling and the potential customer who relies upon them to make buying decisions. For Pinch and Clarke, the challenge for any social analyst is understanding sales outcomes not in terms of abstract economic theory but in terms of the seller's success in capitalising on social or cultural convention.

For the most part, the deep arts of selling have remained peripheral to conceptual concerns and interests in anthropology. Yet, if there is one area in which interests in markets, morality, consumption and selling have converged it is in the anthropology of pharmaceuticals and studies of the sale of so-called 'modern drugs' across sub-Saharan Africa, South and South East Asia. Ironically, as Van der Geest et al (1996) point out in their review of the field, one of the first to draw attention to the informal or unregulated sale of 'patent medicines' in the Global South was Clifford Geertz, whose 1962 book *The Religion of Java*, had included a detailed footnote about a man selling medicine in a town square (p162). A concern with the communication of accurate dosage instructions and the health consequences of selling brand name or generic drugs without prescription led medical anthropologists to pioneer detailed interactional studies and observations at the point of sale. Studies like those by Vinay Kamata and Mark Nichter (1998, 2001) offered detailed accounts of conversations between drug sellers and their customers, describing in detail how vendors sell their medicines and interact with their clientele. Whilst few such studies offered 'thick descriptions', 'rich in context' and the conceptual world of the sellers

(ibid, p163), they brought different communities of vendors - from itinerant hawkers to pharmacy attendants - into the same methodological and conceptual frame, and raised questions about trust, knowledge and economic practice at the moment of sale (Cross and MacGregor 2007). In the early 2000s interests in pharmaceutical marketing (e.g. Applbaum (2004, 2006) drew from other currents, notably the anthropology of advertising (Kemper 2001; Mazzerella, 2003).

By the end of the decade a new wave of economic anthropologists had focused attention on global financial industries, and the combination of interests and passions that motivate traders selling complex financial products like collateralised debt obligations (e.g Ho 2009). Today, one legacy of this work is an attentiveness to the ways that digital information systems and electronic trading technologies are transforming markets around the world, mediating sales of a global commodity like tea with the promise of speed, efficiency, and transparency (Besky 2016).

## **Contributors**

In this special issue we set out to collect ethnographic writing that draws from these diverse currents whilst remaining centered on the person of the seller as a crucial agent of contemporary social, political and economic transformations. What might global ethnographies of selling have to say to each other and what kind of theoretical innovation might we derive from a comparative anthropology of selling? All the papers gathered here share an interest in the 'moment of the sale'. Taken together they offer a reminder that each moment of sale requires an acquired or practical know how: an intimate knowledge of the 'informal rules', 'economic logics', sentiments and reasons that shape economic action. At the same time, they remind us that each moment of sale makes the rules of the market afresh: affirming and re-establishing economic norms and values.

Reading across across the ethnographically developed comparative perspectives of selling presented here three themes reappear. The first concerns the



strategies, styles, and techniques with which people attempt to make themselves persuasive? How do the arts of selling 'sit on the skin' and how is physical intimacy deployed in the work of selling? How is faith, piety or religious language made part of everyday sales-talk? Anderson's essay, which focuses on an Aleppan *suq*, known locally and rather aptly as '*if you please madame*', shows that the vendors' notions of civility – polite etiquette (*adab*), proper style (*uslub*) and restrained or modest behaviour (*hasham*) – are in fact deployed instrumentally to persuade the customer and impel the transaction forwards towards a sale. Here, civility, as it is locally understood, is part of a tactical repertoire of persuasion. In a similar vein, Heslop's essay shows how hospitality, courtesy, and fear, assists commission agents in a wholesale vegetable market in Sri Lanka to persuade farmers to give them produce and persuade retailers to take it away. In Turkey, Crâciun describes in detail how for a headscarf-wearing designer-entrepreneur, the management of public displays of religious piety, such as taking up the veil, is of paramount import in the quest to be persuasive in the market for fashionable Islamic dress. Here, the significance of sincerity and risk of being considered insincere becomes wed to one's ability to persuade. Turning focus away from the typification of the fine salesperson as a man or woman who 'can sell anything' – the Jordan Belforts of the world – Magee's essay illustrates how the aesthetics favoured in Krakowian renderings of selling place emphasis on a good salesperson not as a man or a woman who *persuaded*, but as one who *provided*. Magee argues that emphasis was placed on entrepreneurs as people who provided goods that were already needed or wanted, rather than as people who persuaded others to buy their wares, coercing them. A good product, as Magee's title suggests, 'sells itself'.

The second, concerns the person of the seller and the idea of selling. How do salespeople speak of themselves (as businesspeople, traders, merchants, entrepreneurs or as hosts, mediators, patrons and arbiters) and how do they come to be described by others (as paragons or parasites of virtue, as insiders or outsiders)? Magee's contribution to the issue takes us into the Krakowian work place and the

stymied complications of (bad)management. Here Magee explores the subjectivity of the entrepreneur and the idea of selling oneself. Managers and workers alike place importance on perceived urbanity, achieved in part through language learning and side-projects that prepare them for self-employment. That present them as individuals capable of a certain kind of product discernment that makes them an appropriate provisioner. To offer a particular product to sell or provide, Magee argues, is to offer one's *self* up to appraisal on grounds of commonsense, morality, and expected longevity. In Heslop's essay, emphasis is placed on the seller as being perceived as just (*Sardanaya*), or less positively, as cunning (*capati*), these characteristics are read locally along religious and ethnic lines. For Anderson, the value of civility was central to techniques of salesmanship and modes of self-presentation. Production and presentation of the 'virtuous self' is at stake in the act of selling, and publicly demonstrated both before and after the moment of sale in Anderson's and Craciun's essays. For Craciun's informants, Instagram and Twitter becomes the field on which the subjectivity of the seller must be sold to the public, and where sales made are advertised and reflected upon. In Syria, sales were boastfully recounted, beyond the moment of sale itself, among men in the backrooms of the *Suq* shops.

Finally, each of the essays speak to the notion of selling as a practice through which to perform or reflect upon piety, propriety, and correctness. Where and when do salespeople see selling as the practice of virtue, honour, trust and fairness and how does the space between what people do and what people say they do allow us to explore honour and shame, public and private spheres of admission and performance, and illegality? How do people articulate the fit or disjuncture between morality at the moment of market exchange and the ethics of everyday life? While the notion of propriety appears particularly significant in the Islamic context put forward by Anderson and Craciun, the notion of correctness is pertinent in post-socialist Krakowian and in the cases from South Asia. When the worth of a salesperson lies not in his or her power to persuade, but in his or her knowledge of

how difference works, as is the case in Poland, what tenets about difference and propriety come to the fore?

In collecting these papers together our aim is to bring anthropology's comparative method to bear on different communities of sellers - from those people who appear to benefit the most from market exchange to those who sell in contexts of economic precariousness and for whom selling offers only 'marginal gains' (Guyer 2004). In doing so, we seek to put selling back into a critical, comparative analysis of markets and market relations, laying the groundwork for an analysis of selling and salespeople that can pay attention to questions of personhood and performance, money and the morality of exchange, materiality and mediation.

So: that's the pitch. All we've got is what we can sell. Take it or leave it.

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