Special Section Article

KEIR MARTIN AND SYLVIA YANAGISAKO

States of dependence: Introduction

Anxieties around the moral effects of states of 'dependence' remain central to political and social debate across the world. At a time when the association between wage-labour and a particular valorised conception of adult male independence is increasingly hard to sustain, these contests can take on new forms and new levels of intensity. Anthropology has a potentially valuable contribution to make to these discussions, having long made descriptions of particular forms of 'dependence' central to many of its most distinctive analytic framings. Nonetheless, the concept of 'dependence' itself has rarely been explicitly theorised in anthropological theory, as opposed to other concepts with which it has often been theoretically entwined, such as 'exchange', 'reciprocity' or 'debt', which have been subjected to more concerted theoretical investigation. The papers in this collection provide a series of comparative ethnographic explorations of the role of dependence in shaping new forms of sociality across the globe, as a contribution to the development of an anthropological understanding of the continued evolution of the term's meaning and effect in the 21st century.

Key words dependence, anthropological theory, labour, personhood, markets

Introduction

Recent developments in the occupational structure and employment security in leading industrial capitalist societies, including new waves of restructuring as a result of technological innovation, have increased anxieties about the spread of so-called 'precarity' to previously secure 'middle-class' populations (Standing 2011). Policy makers and academics have, in turn, expressed growing doubts about the likelihood of wage-labour serving as the basis of full political citizenship[1] and personhood (Ferguson 2015; Li 2010). Campaigns against welfare – in their many iterations – have become a cease-less backdrop to political life in Europe and the USA, and parallel discussions have arisen in other regions of the world, albeit with different dynamics and fault-lines of distinction and opposition. In Papua New Guinea, for example, anxieties about the 'wantok' system of obligation have emerged among indigenous elites who accuse other villagers, including their own kin, of a dependency culture and failing to take responsibility for themselves (Martin 2007). In South Africa, the ANC government rejected the findings of the Taylor Report of 2002 which had recommended something like a basic living grant for all South Africans as part of the compensation to the black working class poor who had been left behind as a legacy of apartheid. Although it was the ANC itself that had commissioned the report and had been repeatedly elected with a mandate of transforming the living conditions of the poor black majority population who made up the bulk of its electoral support, in the months following its publication,

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[1] In particular, the right to full suffrage for adults which was previously restricted on grounds of both economic class and gender for reasons related to the alleged 'dependence' of non-property-owning men and of women in general, see below.

ANC ministers lined up to reject its findings, on grounds familiar to those who have lived through the wars on welfare in Europe or the North: namely, that it would discourage the emergence of an economy based on work and instead encourage a culture of dependency among those at the bottom of society.

The discourses generated by these recent shifts in economy and society are hardly novel, but instead have revived old debates over social welfare and given new life to fears of social dependence and to the moral imperative to preserve the independence of the modern political subject. These fears do not, of course, take the exact same form in all societies, nor even in all western capitalist democracies. The terms in which social dependence is characterised and the debates about its causes and consequences vary across societies. So do the specific proposals[2] put forth to alleviate the financial precarity of an expanding sector of the population and in so doing so forge a new relation between the individual and the state. Whether one is for or against these proposals, the debate is framed as both a moral and social problem.

Anthropology has an important contribution to make to these debates. As Martin (forthcoming) notes, dependence has a long genealogy in ethnographic studies ranging from the ways leaders in the South Pacific make others 'dependent' on them through gift-exchange (Malinowski 1922: 161; Sahlins 1963: 292; Epstein 1969: 223; Gregory 1982: 51) to analyses of the 'dependence' at the heart of patron–client relations. Yet, despite the underlying importance of the idea of dependence to a variety of anthropological analyses, the concept itself has remained largely unexplored in comparison to related concepts such as 'exchange', 'reciprocity' and 'debt'. In the 1970s and 1980s, moreover, many anthropologists uncritically accepted 'dependency theory' imported from development studies as an explanation for global inequalities in areas such as health care without having investigated the social processes and relations constituting this dependency or having interrogated the analytic utility of the concept (Morgan 1987: 136).

Our commitment to comparative ethnographic theorisation cautions against any attempt to provide a fixed (singular) definition of dependence, its conceptual core and scope, and its effects, whether globally or in specific regions of the world. Rather, we propose that an understanding of current fears and anxieties of social dependence necessitates ethnographic investigations of how the ascription of dependence is constituted through historically situated processes. As anthropologists we begin from the premise that dependence is not a universal social fact or social problem. Neither is there a singular global logic of dependence and non-dependence. Rather we construe human society as constituted of webs of interdependence, and inherently entangled social relations of interdependence.

If, as many theorists from Marx onwards have argued, a state of absolute individual independence is an illusion that masks interdependency as a fundamental and unavoidable starting point of human society, this raises the question of how some relations of interdependence come to be characterised as dependence and how they are then shaped by this ascription. Rather than treat dependence as a social fact, we treat the *idea* of dependence as an analytical entry point into understanding the formation, re-formation and legitimation of relations of interdependence. Motivated by a comparative ethnographic inquiry into the social effects of ascriptions of dependence in various ethnographic contexts, we ask how and in what contexts specific kinds of relations are cast as ones of dependency rather

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[2] One example of this includes the already-mentioned Basic Income Grant in South Africa (see Meth 2004). The recent corona virus crisis has led to support for this policy in previously unlikely quarters of politics in the US and other countries (Wilderquist 2020; Soergel 2020).

than as something else. What are the effects of successfully casting a relationship as being one of dependence or non-dependence? We propose shifting the question to be addressed ethnographically from how and why certain people become dependent on others and what the effects of that dependency are, to how and why certain actions and relations come to be characterised as dependence and what the effects of such characterisations are.

Attention to the historical specificity of concepts of dependence is as crucial to ethnographic analysis as it is to history. We share with writers concerned to providing a historical analysis the recognition that it was only with the rise of a market in labour as a commodity that wage-labour became reconfigured in England as the basis for a form of independence recognised as legitimate by state authorities and the emerging middle-class, rather than itself another relation of dependence (e.g. Polanyi 2001 [1944]: 104; Macpherson 1962)[3]. Today the assumption that underpinned many modernist teleological visions of a future in which wage-labour would expand across the world and provide the basis for a particular form of legitimate independence has become increasingly difficult to sustain. The increasing doubt about the possibility of the expansion of wage-labour as the basis of independence[4] potentially marks an epochal shift in our models of legitimate, democratic citizenship and personhood (Ferguson 2015; Li 2010). At the same time, it has generated a dread of a looming crisis in many parts of the world, as what had become an ideal type of independence is increasingly unattainable.

The essays in this special issue together demonstrate that the reconfiguration of the link between wage-labour, idioms of independence and full citizenship does not follow a singular global logic. Instead these papers encourage us to explore the different dynamics by which labour and independence are rhetorically and performatively linked across a range of ethnographic contexts. They also show that the ideal type model of wage-labour as freeing individuals from dependence is not uncontested even in capitalist industrial societies where it has become hegemonic. Alternative configurations of work, labour and dependence coexist as both residual and emergent models, as shown in the papers by Peebles and Yanagisako. Likewise, it is the disappearance of an imagined future in which wage-labour might increasingly provide a potentially valorised form of 'independence' that has revived older controversies about the desirability of webs of kinship interdependence among Tolai people in Papua New Guinea, discussed in Martin's paper.[5]

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[3] In a different historical trajectory, Roediger (1991) traces the ways in which the idea of 'independence' became a key motif following the US Civil War for white workers to claim full citizenship and greater rights at work, as opposed to blacks who were characterised as being engaged in more dependent and servile forms of labour.

[4] See below.

[5] Narotzky (2016) for example shows us the ways in which the decline of wage-labour throws people back on different forms of dependence that are often experienced as threatening by those who are forced to rely on them, not just by policy makers who seek to demonise those recipients. In particular, they are forced either into a dependence on kin that is felt to be threatening to their autonomy (adult children forced back to live with their parents after losing their homes) or on state services that are considered 'humiliating' to rely on. Again the point should be stressed that this does not mean that dependence *per se* is always denigrated – attitudes towards it are, as Narotzky observes, 'ambiguous' (2016: 78). Rather it is particular kinds of (perceived) dependence in particular contexts that are considered threatening to particular ideals of personhood. These can be contrasted to the kinds of 'mutual dependence' that Narotzky describes her informants as positing as alternatives that would enable 'individual worth and … regained autonomy' (2016: 78).

Integral to our understanding of the historical specificity of dependence is our critical understanding of the valorisation of 'independence' and non-dependence in Western political theory (Macpherson 1962) and the historical shift in ideas about what enables non-dependence. Any attempt at theorising the attack on welfare dependency throughout the globe must take into account the long history of the concept of individual self-reliance in Western political theory and practice. A genealogy of that history must include the idea of 'Possessive Individualism' advanced by Macpherson (1962) as the implicit vision of the person underpinning the contract between individual and society dating back to Hobbes and Locke. Macpherson argued that at the heart of often very divergent theories of how this relationship should be managed lay an often unstated assumption that the ontological state of the individual person was one of self-ownership of his person and capacities that were prior to the social relations into which he entered. Consequently, the individual owed nothing to the rest of society for his inherent natural capacities that were legitimately conceived of as his original property in himself. From this state of independence, the Possessive Individual could choose to enter into relations of dependence on others, thus choosing to cede the rights in society that accompanied the successful maintenance of his independence.[6]

That something approaching this vision remains a powerful force in contemporary Western European and North American political life is clear. Indeed, it is probably more intensively and widely used to justify political restructuring today than it was half a century ago, when the post-war social democratic consensus still held sway in Western Europe. Just as the idea of Possessive Individualism as a positive virtue was fully accepted in the 17th century by violently opposed factions that only differed as to what criteria enabled a man to claim he had retained his independence (e.g. Macpherson 1962: 108), so in contemporary European and American political debate welfare dependence is almost universally acknowledged to be a problem. Current debate focuses almost exclusively on how it can be overcome. It is not only libertarians and the political right, moreover, who hold dearly to Possessive Individualism but progressive movements such as abortion rights activists whose arguments for a woman's right to choose are rooted in her ownership of her own body.

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[6] There is a long anthropological literature that also questions this predominance of the 'individual' as the starting point of analysis. Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* is perhaps the most notable example. It is striking that although Dumont is highly critical of the assumed universality of the Western individual, that, in contrast to Macpherson's preoccupations, he barely mentions issues of (in)dependence and their relationship to idioms of individuality. Dumont's (1970: 8–9) claim that the world can be divided into two types of society, 'traditional' and 'modern': the former incapable of recognising the Western atomised individual and the latter incapable of conceiving of persons in any other manner, is the diametric opposite of our approach. Our starting assumption is that a form of individual freedom/responsibility based on idioms of appropriate independence is today asserted and rejected across the world. The particular contests over what kinds of relationships might be considered appropriately (in)dependent might be different in different contexts, but even these are not to be seen as the emanations of a particular regional cultural logic. Rather, we construe them as ongoing contests over the limits of relational obligation (e.g. the changing nature of 'labour' as a relationship that can be seen as producing either dependence or independence, discussed historically for England in this introduction and discussed ethnographically in Papua New Guinea in Martin's contribution to this collection). As such, our argument is based neither on an assumed universality of this conception of the atomised individual nor on the opposition of bounded holistic cultural systems of the type that Dumont uses as the basis for his critique of the universalising assumptions of 'Western Individualism' (see Strathern 2004 [1991]: 26).

In 17th-century England when possessive individualism was being enshrined at the heart of English political theory, it was ownership of property in land that was seen as giving a man independence from reliance on others. The assemblage of ideas about personhood, social action and hierarchy inextricably bound up with this propertied possessive individualism were superbly explicated in Jane Austen's early 19th-century novels. As Handler and Segal (1990) have shown in their analysis of the hierarchies of choice in Austen's novels, concepts of dependence and independence figure centrally in the characters' concerns about their relative social positions. Indeed, the principle of independence lies at the core of their comparisons of social status.

> To be independent is to be governed only by one's own will; in other words, to have the power as an individual to make choices and to be governed by those choices alone. By contrast, to be dependent is to be governed by the will of others … to have others either choose for one or to be oneself the choice of others. These two possibilities are ranked: it is better to be independent than dependent. (Handler and Segal 1990: 45)

The power to choose is viewed as characterising 'the highest, most civilised form of human existence'. Most individuals in Austen's novels find themselves independent in relations to those to whom they are above and dependent on those they are beneath. Individuals have different degrees of independence according to features of social identity including age and generation, sex and marital status and class, but the categorical superiority of independence over dependence is unequivocally agreed on by Austen's characters.

Austen's hierarchies of choice draw a clear link between independence and dependence on the one hand and hierarchies of status and power on the other. It is not the case, however, that an abstract state of independence generates greater power and higher status, but rather that those with greater power and higher status are able to claim independence for themselves and ascribe dependence to others. A father can claim greater independence than his child, who is viewed as his dependent. Yet a man is not a father without a child and over time he may depend increasingly on that child's respect, obedience, labour and social networks for his status. Despite the interdependence of the father–child relation, fathers often succeed in claiming independence for themselves and ascribing dependence to their children long after the latter have reached adulthood because of the formers' hold on property and social capital.

The rise of industrial capitalism shifted the focus from property as the basis of independence to wage-labour as the mechanism for achieving and maintaining a state of independent self-reliance. Wage-labour came to be conceptualised among all but the wealthiest propertied families as both the outcome of individual agency and the precondition for its maintenance. By the 19th century, in the UK wage-labour had become the gold standard for the preservation of the independent rational choice that, as Macpherson (1962) noted, was considered the basis for allowing participation in political decision-making. As the vote was extended to various classes of wage-earners, other groups such as women and vagrants continued to be excluded from universal suffrage until 1928. Today, welfare dependency continues to be viewed as the destination of those who have failed (or chosen not) to secure access to a wage, whether it be from their own labour or from another on whom they can make a legitimate familial claim. As James and Kirwan's paper in this collection demonstrates, the boundary between

those who sustain themselves with wage-labour and those 'dependent' on welfare is nowhere near as clear-cut as theorists such as Harriet Martineu have attempted to assert as far back as the 1830s (see Polanyi 2001 [1944]: 105).

Our aim in tracing the above historical shifts in ideas of independence in the UK is not to argue for a generalised theory of the relation between wage-labour and independence. To the contrary, our point is that this history is crucial to grasping the culturally situated process through which wage-labour came to be construed as a means for avoiding dependence in the UK and other nation-states influenced by it. Far from being the self-evident basis of independence, wage-labour can be construed as a particular form of interdependence that enables claims of independence from obligations in some contexts. As noted above, when possessive individualism was being enshrined at the heart of English political theory in 17th-century England, it was ownership of property in land that was seen as endowing a man with independence from the reliance on others. Wage-labour was explicitly viewed as a relationship of dependence that tied the wage-earner to the wage-provider in a manner that made the former no longer an independent actor capable of the independent choice that merited an active voice in society, such as the right to vote. Like charity, welfare and gifts, it could be construed as a social relationship of dependency in which an individual cedes considerable amounts of his free will in exchange for the receipt of benefits (see Yanagisako's paper on the critique of wage-labour as a form of dependency by Italian family firms). Furthermore, while it might appear reasonable in a situation of full employment to hold up wage-labour as the model of independence, this conviction has become increasingly untenable in situations, such as that pertaining today in South Africa and many other parts of the world, where, from both a labour market and government perspective, there is a growing surplus population; i.e. an ever-increasing number of persons whose potential labour is unlikely to ever be useful from the perspective of capitalist production.[7] In such situations, making wage-labour the most basic measure of social personhood is reasonable only if we are comfortable with denying social personhood to large sectors of the population.

Discourses of dependency in Europe and North America have long been permeated by hierarchies of race, gender and class. Racialised ascriptions of dependence were crucial in the legitimation and maintenance of colonial rule, and the ongoing war on welfare 'dependency' continues to rely on the mobilisation and reconfiguration of these ascriptions. Critical analysis of these ascriptions reveals how they work to demonise non-white groups, characterising them as less than complete persons. At the same time, ethnographic investigations document the surprising variety of ways in which ascriptions of dependence can be re-mobilised in changing political circumstances. For example, explicitly racialised contrasts that work to demonise the alleged dependence of the white working-class on the state have been observed in the UK by sociologists and anthropologists in recent years (e.g. Skeggs 2004; Smith 2012). Associations of dependence across the world commonly involve changing assumptions about the gendered nature of dependencies and the relationship between 'economic' and 'domestic' or 'kin-based' relations. Central to the emerging neoliberal consensus that underpinned the war on welfare dependency in the USA and the UK in the 1980s were the gendered figures, such as the single-mother

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[7]   This observation has become widely circulated within anthropological theory in recent years, particularly through the work of Li (2010) and Ferguson (2015).

on welfare who was denigrated for choosing to make herself illegitimately dependent on the state rather than legitimately dependent on a male breadwinner.

States of dependence

We have titled this collection of papers 'States of dependence' to highlight the entangled notions of personhood and governance that have pervaded popular and academic discussions of dependence, a good part of which can be traced to the UK and US legacies we have discussed above. In this dense web of cultural meanings, dependence and independence are largely construed as states of being that constrain critical analysis in at least two crucial ways. First, it obscures the fact that both dependence and independence are inherently relational terms rather than characteristics possessed by people, collectivities or states. Social actors can, on reflection, only be independent from something or someone. Likewise, they can only be dependent on someone or something. A relational approach, in contrast, cries out for an analysis of the processes through which inequalities of power, status and resources shape ascriptions of dependence and claims of independence. Second, the view of dependence as a state of being overlooks the temporal dimension in the making of dependence. While many discussions of the precarity in the 'new economy' recognise the political-economic histories of capitalism and the state that have led us here, they tend to overlook the intergenerational histories that have been crucial in producing financial precarity. Yet we know that precarity is not the result of a single event such as the loss of a job. Rather it is the accumulation of events over time in people's family, occupational and financial histories. Those in wealthy, propertied families do not become homeless when they lose a job, because their financial and social resources enable them to weather a period of income deficit in ways that those from families without property cannot. Piketty's (2014) study of wealth inequality documents how strongly people's life paths are shaped by intergenerational transfers of wealth. In short, financial and social dependence is not a state created by individuals but by an accumulation of events and relations over time. By focusing on the historical and intergenerational processes through which inequalities of wealth and power are produced, we gain a more complete understanding of how claims and ascriptions of dependence and independence are produced over time.

The papers in this collection highlight the performative power of contested ascriptions of dependence and claims of independence. They explore the dynamics by which contestations over legitimate ascriptions of dependence and independence are used to stabilise or destabilise political settlements in a variety of ethnographic contexts across the world. By explicitly problematising the idea that there are states of dependence or independence and instead investigating ethnographically how certain relations are cast as dependence or characterised as exhibiting independence, this collection provides the basis for a critical anthropological engagement with one of the key rhetorical tools being used to restructure politics globally in the 21st century. The collection illustrates ethnographically the ways in which ascriptions of dependence are used to curtail and extend changing patterns of relational obligation across the globe. In opening up a comparative ethnographic analysis, it shows how relations between dependency and personhood are more unpredictable, variable and contested than a simple association between freedom from dependence and individual autonomy might allow for.

The unstable relationship between ascriptions of dependence and claims to individual autonomy is explored in papers by Rakopoulos, Martin and Yanagisako.

Finally, the collection reveals the spectres of power, hierarchy and inequality that lurk in discussions of dependence and independence and that are crucial to their production, whether in family relations, work relations or relations between people and the state. In Europe and the USA, discourses of the virtues of independence and the hazards of dependence commonly obscure the relations of power that compromise these claims. The reconfiguration of the link between wage-labour, idioms of independence and full citizenship does not follow a singular global logic, however, and the papers explore the different dynamics by which labour and independence are rhetorically and performatively linked across the range of ethnographic contexts.

The papers

James and Kirwan demonstrate the ways in which recent UK government reconfigurations of welfare payments can be seen in part as attempts to attack the 'dependency' of claimants on the state. Although this might be seen as an attempt to reverse the ascription of dependence on those who rely on benefits, it is premised on the assumption that the welfare system as currently established creates this undesirable state. Beyond the relationship between individual claimant and state welfare office, their paper also exposes in detail the ways in which this relationship is inherently entangled with relations of interdependence with other significant figures, such as volunteer advisers and kinship networks that spread around the world. While the attempts to rhetorically drag claimants out of 'dependence' can be seen as an instance of neoliberal 'responsibilisation', James and Kirwan caution that there are other important dynamics at play and that such governmental moves are themselves entangled with other wider networks of interdependent redistribution.

Martin explores the inherent ambiguity contained within ascriptions of dependence in the context of arguments about 'corruption' among Tolai people in Papua New Guinea. Although the idea that wage-labour might create 'independence' from ambivalently regarded kinship networks is clearly understood, it is not universally welcomed. Even though kinship interdependence is often viewed by Papua New Guineans as a barrier to economic development, it can simultaneously be held up as the only available realistic social safety-net in a context in which neither state welfare payments nor wage-labour seem likely to provide any kind of alternative. Like James and Kirwan, Martin's paper highlights the ways in which a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between state and citizen in terms of a dynamic of dependence necessarily opens up discussion of the legitimacy of other forms of interdependence among citizens.

Rakopoulos' paper furthers the analysis of the ways in which different dynamics of 'dependence' interact with and affect each other. Taking the codes of silence and honour among male mafiosi in Sicily as his starting point, Rakopoulos explores how interdependence among mafiosi shapes a sense of independence from the state among those men who are bound together by these ties. This dynamic is reversed by those mafiosi who become prosecution witnesses in anti-mafia trials in return for witness protection. They are now conceptualised as being highly dependent on the state as a result of their destruction of the ties of mutual interdependence that previously

gave them a differently validated masculine personhood. The informers can be seen in many ways as the epitome of idealised 'modern' citizens: totally removed from dependencies on kinship networks whose personhood is almost entirely constituted through a dyadic relationship with the state that guarantees their continued existence – a position that acts as the shadow of their extreme 'illegitimacy' from this position previously.

Yanagisako's paper explores how changing capital accumulation builds on and alters previous patterns in the ascription of dependence among Italian garment manufacturers. As with James and Kirwan's paper, she explores how changing transnational patterns of relatedness, including kinship, are increasingly part of the situation in which people attempt to define and ascribe dependence in order to shape future relations. The relocation of much of the work of manufacturing to China in recent decades has cut off the possibilities for managers to create their own firms, leaving them trapped for longer periods in a wage-labour relationship that is often characterised as a form of dependence.

Finally, Peebles discusses the relationship between ideas of (in)dependence and the related conception of 'sovereignty' in political thought. As he observes, sovereignty is often described in a manner that implies that it is a 'luxury good that can only be held by a select few', much as 'independence' was held to be in 17th-century England in Macpherson's depiction. And as with 'independence', Peebles suggests that we should also be wary of the common characterisation of 'sovereignty' as a state of being or possession of an individual or group, but could more fruitfully begin by exploring the dynamics by which sovereignty/dependency dialectically addresses other values, rather than 'as a value in and of itself'. Exploring the history of debtors' prisons, he reiterates Ferguson's argument that sometimes the rational move is to increase one's dependence rather than to be engaged in an endless attempt to attain an idealised liberal subjectivity that denies all such dependencies. Unlike Ferguson's groundbreaking contribution to the discussion, however, Peebles' contribution is not premised on a non-Western cultural logic but instead seeks to show the ways in which this dialectic interplay of dependence/independence can be found at the heart of 'Western modernity', suggesting that it is this interplay that we might usefully take as the starting point for historical and ethnographic analyses.

Keir Martin iD
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Oslo
Postboks 1091, Blindern
Oslo 0317
Norway
k.j.c.martin@sai.uio.no

Sylvia Yanagisako iD
Department of Social Anthropology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
USA
syanag@stanford.edu

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États de dépendance: Introduction

Les inquiétudes en ce qui concerne les conséquences morales des états de « dépendance » restent au cœur du débat politique et social dans le monde entier. À une époque où l'association du travail salarié à une certaine conception valorisée de l'indépendance des adultes masculins devient de plus en plus difficile à soutenir, ces contestations se diversifient et s'intensifient. L'anthropologie pourrait considérablement contribuer à enrichir ces discussions, car elle place depuis longtemps la description de formes spécifiques de « dépendance » au centre de ses cadres analytiques les

plus distinctifs. Néanmoins, le concept de « dépendance » lui-même a rarement été explicité dans la théorie anthropologique, contrairement à d'autres concepts auxquels il a souvent été lié, tels que l'« échange », la « réciprocité » ou la « dette », qui ont fait l'objet d'études plus concertées. Les articles de ce recueil proposent une série d'analyses ethnographiques comparatives sur le rôle de la dépendance dans la formation de nouvelles formes de sociabilités à travers le monde, contribuant ainsi au développement d'une lecture anthropologique des constantes évolutions du sens et des effets de ce terme au XXe siècle.

Mots-clés dépendance, théorie anthropologique, travail, individualité, marchés