

Hirokazu Miyazaki, *Arbitraging Japan. Dreams of Capitalism at the End of Finance*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2013

“The subprime crisis revealed a simple fact: that is, that finance is nothing but a fraud [...] As it has turned out, finance was the arbitrage of knowledge gaps between those who knows [those in the financial industry] and those who don't [the public], not arbitrage between markets, and this fact has been revealed” (p. 1).

No other quote, put at the very *incipit*, or as a sort of epigraph, can best introduce the reader to the content of Miyazaki's book. This sentence by a financial market professional, expresses also the sense of the end of an era, the era in which bankers and financiers were regarded as movers and shakers of economy and society. Hence the questions that guided the research of the author: “What does this sense of the end of an era, widely shared among financial market professionals, mean for the future of capitalism, whose creative and destructive force finance has demonstrated repeatedly over the last three decades? What does it mean for financial market professionals, whose careers and lives have been driven by utopian imaginaries and dreams of economic, social, and personal transformation inspired by techniques and theories of finance? What does it mean for critics of capitalism, who have long predicted the burst of financial markets and their underlying deceptive and destructive logics? And what is specific about the Japanese inflections of all these questions?”

To answer these questions the author realizes a challenging longitudinal ethnographic field research among Japanese financial market professionals in Tokyo, a research lasted around 13 years (between 1998 and 2011). The book is a study of a kind of utopianism or intellectual excitement that animated a group of Japanese pioneers in derivative trading.

Miyazaki's ethnographic account is based in the well-established field of the anthropology of finance and the social studies of finance, but also on the background of the so called *performativity* of economic science, and follows the tradition of the anthropological attention to the parallel between anthropologists and their interlocutors regarded as coanalysts, cointerpreters, and cotheorists, where his ultimate goal is to explore where dialogue and collaboration may take place between them.

Naturally, the abovementioned questions can only provide the reader with a glimpse of the anthropological complexities explored by Miyazaki, all of them turning around the notion of *arbitrage* and the extension of this notion to many other fields, included the life of the arbitrageurs, but also that of the researcher himself. In this respect, the six chapters – 1) “Shakespearean arbitrage”; 2) “Between arbitrage and speculation”; 3) “Trading on the limit of learning”; 4) “Econ-

omy of dreams”; 5) “The last dream”; 6) “From arbitrage to the gift” – are a sort of variations on the theme of the arbitrage.

Technically speaking, arbitrage is the most important theoretical construct underling modern finance: it is a trading strategy seeking to profit from a difference in the prices of an asset in two different markets. Nevertheless the attempt pursued by the author is to show the *ambiguity* and constantly shifting conceptual boundaries of such a notion. In this respect one of the accomplishment of the book is the departure from the long-established idea that professional traders are rational, irrational or even hyper-rational. As *thinking subjects*, they embrace, as Miyazaki argues and shows throughout the book, “ambiguity, complexity, and the ultimate unknowability of the world” (p. 6).

Also, this ambiguity depends on the fictional status of arbitrage, which, in turn, feeds back on the traders’ lives. Arbitrage is based on a fiction: it’s an “as if” notion of no arbitrage. Hence the ambivalence of arbitrageurs: they believe in arbitrage while knowing that is a fictional and theoretical construct that works and lasts as long as you believe in it. Arbitrage has a “self-canceling tendency”, evidenced by the way in which arbitrageurs exploit and eliminate arbitrage opportunities and ultimately themselves. The collapse of arbitrage – and the lost of the game in the arbitrageurs’ lives – depends also on the loss of faith in it.

Indeed, there are many other issues and/or corollaries related to the notion of arbitrage, such as its circular logic, the crucial distinction between arbitrage and speculation, the notion of dream, and the role of beliefs in market and life, and last but not least the issue of hope that Miyazaki has the merit to have re-launched as a key issue in anthropology but also in social sciences (*The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), contributing to an understanding of the place of hope in knowledge formation (but also elsewhere), and that he has never ceased exploring (see the forthcoming book, *The Economy of Hope*, edited with Richard Swedberg). Of course, all these issues would deserve a much wider analysis than this short review.

To conclude, though the disasters and injustices caused by that kind of intellectual excitement or utopianism are undeniable, Miyazaki insists on “the importance of taking financial utopianism seriously. It is only through an active effort to reorient financial market professionals that real market reform will be possible. And this can only happen if financial market professionals are taken seriously as thinking subjects capable of reflecting on and reorienting the place of their expertise in the economy and society. Otherwise the seemingly universal appeal of finance remains intact. Diversity in the future can be guaranteed only when diversity in the past is kept in view” (p. 23).

For all those interested in all these issues, as well as in Economics, Anthropology, and, more generally, in keeping alive the ‘spirit’ of the human being through the ‘bread’ of the humanities and humanistic social sciences (in which I would also like to include “Law and humanities”), I cannot but suggest to let them nourish by this book. It’s worth it.

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