

## Africa Has Never Been “Traditional”: So Can We Make a General Case? A Response to the Articles

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**Abstract:** *Marginal Gains* (2204) has been described as a surprising and bold book. Since the articles in this collection, which take one or other of its arguments as points of departure, share certain similar qualities, they can be treated as a collective effort initiating new debate with non-African economic research and thinking. This article reviews the argument of the book, highlights the concept and phenomenon of ordinal ranking in both the book and the articles, and then uses the findings to begin an appreciative critique of the ideas of Michel Callon. Although Callon's approach intersects with that of *Marginal Gains* in many ways, the scalar ranking of people, and the use of rank to exclude and divert, finds more prominence in the book's approach, which also has more relevance for Europe than economists seem to have acknowledged so far. The article ends with a new instance of ordinal ranking, from Cameroon.

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## Introduction

The articles in this special issue of the *African Studies Review*, and other recent commentaries on *Marginal Gains*, contain both an implicit demand and the inspiration to meet that demand: namely, that we extend the theory and method of the book in order to engage directly with the intellectual frameworks of other disciplines (see Servet 2005; Coussy 2005).<sup>1</sup> *Marginal Gains* was described as “bold” or “original” by several reviewers (Haugerud 2005; Ralph 2005). And in a seminar response (Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, March 15, 2007), Jean-Francois Bayart went one step further, depicting it as “un livre assez sauvage,” a phrase whose allusions are undoubtedly multiple and fascinating. The idea that the book contains some “wild” thinking is certainly supported by the almost centrifugal diversity of the nine empirical essays in this issue, from scholars in disciplines (history, economics, literature and expressive culture) other than my own. They engage with the book more by extending it in their own directions than by means of classic academic-style debate that would concentrate on its terms, methods, and theoretical genealogy. Some of the authors even detect a certain unrestricted abandon as their own ideas foray outward from *Marginal Gains*; in a personal note to me, one even used the term “wild” about her own paper. Yet in terms of scholarship and craft the articles are anything but wild. Each one selects and amplifies lines of argument on subjects with which the authors are deeply familiar, and on theoretical issues to which, using exacting research methods, they have already contributed original thinking. Bayart’s comment also sits oddly and interestingly against Michel Callon’s (2005) depiction of “researchers in the wild” as working *outside* of formal institutions and committed to the acquisition and articulation of a conspicuously uninstitutional kind of knowledge. After all, we, the authors of these articles, are all pretty established in universities.

So does our scholarship, when it is *read*, somehow come across as the work of undersocialized scholars? Recently, colleagues working in other regions of the world have suggested to me that collectively, scholars of Africa do indeed convey a partial myopia about theoretical currents and parallel developments elsewhere. In recent years, at least, we have seemed not quite “up-to-date,” unless like Achille Mbembe we are producing dazzling innovations that are also, in their own way, “wild.” In my own case, the critique that I neglected current relevant literatures is partly justified and does demand explanation (see below). Africa’s own experience over the past three decades, however, also enters in here. Perhaps we have moved on from a moment of bold engagement with general theory, as in the 1970s neo-Marxist initiatives, to an era of rather stunned alienation as the concerns and terms of analysis in our disciplines—such as rational choice, post-modernism, and the linguistic turn—lost intellectual traction on Africa’s particular position in the world. So the fascinating and surprising conver-

gences, and the sense of momentum, among these essays may be one sign of a new ambition to reengage critically with broader comparative studies and theoretical innovations in the area of economic life, even though the terms are not yet fully developed. *Marginal Gains* drew considerably on the work of the authors whose articles appear here, and its concerns were somewhat particularist to Africa. But in these articles the authors do move toward larger claims. As Berry writes "the point is a more general one" beyond Africa (2007:60; see also Maurer, Udry, Verran, and Ferguson, this issue), while at the same time, as Barber writes, there are still phenomena—such as "the exogenous indigeneity of invention" and the "disjunctive, plural, heterogeneous mode" of self-valuation for which yet deeper immersion within Africa is still imperative (2007:121,114; see also Adebayo, Roitman, and Geschiere, this issue).

This collection is still clearly on the cusp of enunciating theoretical coordinates, as the introductory article says of *Marginal Gains* itself. The juxtaposition of disparate themes set in diverse times and places, in both the book and the articles, may convey a certain escape-artist, rather than confrontational and argumentative, mood. We are attentive to what lies beyond the confines of "confined research" (see Callon n.d.), a tactic that lends an overall obstreperousness to the intellectual project. I will address particular issues later, but let me explain one major condition of my own writing here. Although I knew of the innovative theoretical work of Michel Callon, Daniel Miller, Nicholas Thomas, and others on markets, had alluded tangentially to other major social theorists, and had also read some key works in the substantial relevant French scholarship, I self-consciously avoided taking on a frontal and closely argued engagement with them until I felt that empiricist immersion and mid-level theoretical engagement had gone as far as I could take it. And in the event, the historical and ethnographic sources literally filled my mind to overflowing, to the extent that I had to retain the parsimonious format of the lecture and cut out almost all footnotes in order to keep the contours of the argument clear, even to myself. Most of these articles are written in a similar spirit, while taking the empirical, open-ended search much further along certain lines than I could.

The reason for such a suspension is a classic one for Africa, and perhaps for anthropology: until we fill our minds with the world as it presents itself, we do not know how little or much we know of what there is to know, and we do not know how painfully limited even our most nuanced concepts may be to address the sheer originality of the human cultural and social capacity for patterned and reflexive/recursive imagination and action. Social scientists assume that "muddle" is an unlikely enduring condition in social and cultural life. Apparently muddled peoples and places, therefore, must provoke critical meditation about our own perceptual and conceptual limits, and we should reach a plateau of interpretation before a debate can pick up.

So the book was not devoted to theoretical fine-tuning or debate, at least in the first instance. It was concerned with the question of whether, in any sense, we can depict what Verran here refers to as a “vague whole” (2007:179) or consonance in the economic life of Atlantic Africa over time, and with making its empirical patterning and reflexive/recursive processes a theoretically independent reference point or landmark. Theoretical independence, of course, is an oxymoron; what I mean here is that the components of the picture come from so many disparate sources, placed in continuous conversation with each other, that rejection of the convergence would be implausible. Subsequent theorists, unless dismissing the depiction altogether, would have to acknowledge it and engage it, rather than just reclassifying things under their own conceptual schemes. By this means I hoped that insights would be extrapolable beyond particular geographic boundaries. Hence the title of my response here. By opening up even wider our sense of ignorance about the originalities and commonalities of African cultural histories, we can absolutely reject the closing down of intellectual challenge that results from their classification as generically “traditional.” Prominent Western theorists have used “traditional” in precisely this way, in part because of their Weberian inspiration about the originality of European modernity. Giddens (1994), for example, makes astonishingly uninformed and even improbable statements about knowledge and status in “traditional society,” using Africa as the example (see discussion in Guyer 1996). But then other parts of the historical experience of both Europe and the wider world disappear into obscurity and fixity as “orphan” topics (to use a concept of Callon). Possibly this explains what Callon describes as the effort of “wild research” “to invent and experiment (with) new forms [and] ... to intervene in the process of the production and diffusion of knowledge” (n.d. 7). Intervention from Africa about modern economic theory must seem wild if the place itself has become an orphaned intellectual project, consigned to tradition or anomaly. But by the same token, such an intervention is likely to highlight something *general* in the rest of the world’s experience that has also been orphaned along with it, and that is what we can work toward reconnecting to theoretical initiatives from Africa.

## Reprise

My central focus in *Marginal Gains* was the links and overlaps among certain themes in varied times, places, and domains of life, most notably: (1) the centrality of value disjuncture in transactional life, starting from but not restricted to the interface with Europe; (2) a pervasive asymmetry in the cultural framing of transactions; (3) open multiplicity of the value scales potentially at play in any one transaction; (4) a repertorial rather than a systems structure to the coexistence of value scales and institutionalized transactional forms; (5) the multiplicity and changeability of cur-

rencies; and thereby (6) the inescapable performativity of economic events. I gave particular ethnographic examples and set the whole picture in the historical context of the continuing asymmetrical interface with European mercantilism, the recurrent turbulence that this has entailed in Africa, and the relative absence (or neglect) of regulation and protection on the part of state and financial institutions (see Hibou 2004). In order for me to convey the materiality of transactions as they were described by participants and in texts that we no longer study very closely, it was important to give some sense of "being there" and to remind ourselves of a florescence to monetary phenomena and to culture in general which still surpasses the categories and arguments of formal academic thinking.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to offer examples of West and Central African economic disciplines that are *discernible* by conventional methods but are not yet *analyzable* through the conventional theoretical repertoire, in part because our concepts are based on assumptions that simply do not apply to Africa: equivalence as a doctrine of exchange, and the presence of banks and the state to continually recreate and sanction the terms of economic doctrine. Avoiding an alternative of cultural essentialism, I argued that certain formal features, even if not their cultural and expressive forms, were perfectly consonant with features of European capitalism as it has been practiced in Africa. They are not facilely general (as in "rational"), not "traditional," nor, in a conventionalized Marxist sense, simply functional to accumulation in either an intended or unintended fashion. They were (and are) features fully internal to the practice, even if not the theory, of commercial capitalism, showing up in times and places within Africa but also elsewhere.

The links to "elsewhere" and the theoretical work in those locations I had to leave for later. The basic experimental move I made for addressing the Atlantic African sources in their own terms was to question, on the grounds of empirical evidence, the core assumption of *equivalence* that is built into price theory. The existence of volatile change and multiple frictions, without mediation by law and finance, means that people do not necessarily see transactions as reflecting the fixed value of, for example, bullion to be measured against goods, (i.e., the pure silver measure passionately defended for seventeenth-century England by John Locke). Only tautologically, and by excluding many obvious elements, can equivalence be seen as reflecting "demand" and "supply." The ethnography provides evidence instead of the widespread recognition of asymmetry in exchange and of multiple value scales brought to bear on transactions in all the different times and places that I studied in the chapters. Should analysis therefore be oriented in one conventional direction or another: for example by ignoring asymmetry as a cultural feature and insisting on analysis in terms of demand and supply in markets? Or alternatively, by recognizing asymmetry and insisting that "prices" are more in the nature of social payments, where the margin reflects a status or power remainder? But these two options would replicate the old formalist-substantivist stalemate, in

which insistence on conceptual clarity worked only if the evidence was strictly pruned and tamed. If the frame of inclusion for transactional characteristics were set much wider, so as to respect the “wildness” of the evidence, altogether new insights about newly discernible patterns might break out of the sterile deadlock of the past. I could go only this far.

The articles remind us that there is a lot further to go. In different ways, Verran and Berry (this issue) go straight to the profound epistemological question: Are we still looking—in some form or another—for invariants? If so, in what form? Heretofore unrecognized cultural principles? Enduring historical patterns? Pervasive relational algorithms? If we still have a homing instinct for coherence, is this just a function of the inertias of our founding training in systematicity, or can other philosophical assumptions support coherence and order and take them creatively into new domains of life and thought? If, alternatively, we embrace disorder, where can social scientific work optimally focus? Even if an answer in the form of an abstract formulation to these questions is not explicitly offered, all empirical expositions still imply resolutions simply by virtue of the point at which we rest content and look no further. I was convinced, as Verran suggests, that the book described several related and nested arcs of exploration and therefore does imply a “wholeness.” The concepts and patterns that recur in the eight empirical chapters provide plausible alternatives to recognized theoretical impasses and support a series of intellectual projects, at different scales. The articles here can advance along the precision gradient and begin to make at least some connections and critiques with respect to cognate approaches to popular economies. Encouraged by them, I offer my subsequent commentary as a foray into other literatures and other places.

## **The Articles**

These articles do contain disagreements with me, which I will address. But overall they have the effect of pushing the work onward: by means of empirical studies that extend the approach and argument and make them more nuanced, and with critical thinking about concepts, methods, and theory. It is exhilarating to see that the issues I left open could be cultivated further. At the same time, it was somewhat surprising to me that the work of scholars whose disciplines, theoretical framing, and analytical techniques are so varied could overlap to such an extent and that they could find so much common ground. Many of the arguments and findings in these articles were revelations, but they also confirmed a number of assumptions: that closer comparisons of a wider variety of Atlantic African political orders would yield some profound conclusions about money and rank (Adebayo, Geschiere); that a detour through the poetics of other places and peoples and back again would throw fragmentation as a style and death as a conceptual reference point into sharp relief (Barber); that other rural societies,

and not only in Africa, might *also* be better analyzed as social ranks or gradients rather than as income quintiles or social classes (Udry and Woo); that the *new* frontiers of *formal* policy instantiate disjunctures, like conversionary thresholds, rather than the homogenized "rational legal" orders of theory (Ferguson; Maurer); that history itself is a domain of unsettled scalar thinking, and not only in Africa (Berry); and that close reading of my argument as a whole endorses my spirit of agnosticism while also demanding closer conversation with existing theory (Roitman; Verran). Confirmatory details were added at the ASA panel discussion at which these articles initially were presented as papers. For example, Adebayo mentioned being less puzzled now about the proverbial Igbo millionaires' propensity for dressing in shorts. Piot's paper revealed the extraordinary adeptness and scalar manipulation that is evident in a context in which the highest level of the formal sector meets the most ordinary level of "the people."<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note, for subsequent theoretical contemplation, that the convergences are not based on a common philosophical ground. The authors would not necessarily agree on theory and method, nor use the same techniques, nor contribute to debates in the same disciplines. Witness Maurer, in his book on Islamic banking, taking a critical stance relative to matters empirical "What I am after," he writes, "is a mode of ethnography that undermines its empiric," and he warns that what he calls the "empiric" is often a failure: "When the empirics fails, other modes of reflection might become important" (2005:22). Udry and Woo, by contrast, apply classic quantitative analytical techniques from economics and carry out most of their work in that mode, based on survey data. Barber's entire oeuvre emanates from her faithful recording of oral texts and dramatic performances. Berry's empirical attention to coexistences and historical sequences of alternatives and contradictions is based on historiography of the most attentive kind. I could continue. But these examples suffice to pose a question. Do all of us working on and in Africa recognize such a poverty of theory that any wild initiative is better than "normal science"? Was I so epistemologically agnostic in this book that it could be read by exasperated colleagues in whatever way they found liberating? Or is there a more profound level of convergent thinking that we all sense but that remains unarticulated?

I'm going to hazard an interpretation, and work from there. The intellectual teeth of everyone in this forum seem to be sunk into the concept of rank, or ordinal scaling, albeit in different ways. But rank was only one of the topics I addressed under its own title, although of course the whole book implies the pervasive importance of things, people, and qualities being arranged as "first," "second," "third," and so on: in terms of importance, or access, or beauty, or any other quality that would have to be measured in numbers for the intervals to be quantified and the properties to be calculable (as in "twice as beautiful," "ten times as powerful," etc.). Ordinality—as distinct, on the one hand, from simple nominal classification within a semantic domain (naming of types), and from ratio-scale measure-

ment, allowing all forms of calculation, on the other—comes out of the shadows in my book as an undervalued structuring idea in both the social and the cognitive worlds. Rank emerges yet more powerfully in these papers as an empirically recognizable property in a whole variety of contexts, and a concept that several disciplines and topics seem to benefit from addressing. Ordinal scales, unlike ratio scales, are finite and concrete; an order has internal structuring principles and anchoring limit cases or conditions. And yet, unlike nominal classifications, orders are also highly permissive of addition and subtraction: of quantified intervals as well as discrete elements. Elaboration is far more permissive than for taxonomies. Close attention to these additions and subtractions seems to lead us all out of the twin dilemmas in the formalist/substantivist debate. We can escape both the tautology of equivalence with its associated infinite fungibility of calculation on a ratio scale and also the ethnic specificity implicit in nominal scales, and turn attention instead to orders and to process, context, and the power to produce situational fixity in competitive life. It occurs to me that our sense of a “vague” structure, infused with changeability, may owe a great deal to our collective recognition of the power of ordinality, which is by its very nature both structured and contextualized. And the apparent permissiveness in our variety of method may owe much to the fact that ordinal scales can be analyzed in several ways: by formal methods at moments of performance or material realization, and by more fluid narrative and processual analytics for addressing their continual constitution and entailments.

The articles in this issue extend the empirical diversity of social ranking in Africa (Geschiere; Adebayo); the aesthetic and cultural forms that both express and mediate it (Barber; Udry and Woo); the historical process and content of transactions that enact ranking (Berry); the application of nominal and ratio scales to the purpose of constructing the ordinal rankings that operate in social and political life (Maurer; Ferguson); and the experiential and cognitive bases and associated theoretical problems of addressing it (Roitman; Verran). I devote a paragraph below to each point, even though brevity obviates doing justice to all the issues. Then I take Verran’s challenge further.

### **Ranking and Ordinal Scales: Some Advances**

I argued in an earlier article in *ASR* (Guyer 1996) that in the 1960s, anthropology had moved too rapidly from analyzing African social orders in terms of solidarity and hierarchy to class-based analysis, with the addition of the “Big Man” accumulative dynamic as a particular form of class. This approach short-circuited theoretical attention to a great deal of evidence on ranking, priority, precedence (founder/follower, ordered seniority of wives, age grades, etc.) that continued to be described, and to the variety of trajectories to self-realization along these scales. So in *Marginal Gains*



(2004), as a corrective, I highlighted ordinal dynamics, which fit well with my aim of building consonance between social and cognitive processes, and potentially between society, number (in non-zero number systems), and fractal geometric art and architecture (see Eglash 2002). The articles in this issue refine and add to that analysis. I address them in the order in which they seem to me to segue from one major implication to the next (although the other conversations among them would be richer than any linear exposition could encompass).

### *African Social Rank and Its Variability*

Both Geschiere (43–56) and Adebayo (87–110) are concerned about social typification. They see an ethnic and historical variation in Atlantic Africa that Igbo and Ibibio social history cannot plausibly represent. Or, in any case, one needs to understand other dynamics, especially when the people themselves see ethnic and regional differences very starkly. Further, they insist that ranking is only one principle of social organization and cognitive ordering, so the various combinations and interpenetrations have very important effects. The social locus, the means and the forms of competition over rank are not only varied but also change over time. In Geschiere's comparison of Beti, Maka, and Bamileke in Cameroon, hierarchical office-holding among Bamileke protects incumbents against money dissipation while acquiring office and maintaining support. In less hierarchical contexts, tournaments of value are frequent, fierce, and expensive. Adebayo's comparison of Yoruba and Akan over time similarly demands attention to combinations and permutations of rank. For example, it is crucially important in understanding the dynamics of rank to distinguish among the specific transactions that enact and sustain it. Adebayo makes the distinction between wealth displayed for visual appraisal and wealth actually distributed to others. The exact combination of display and distribution that allows someone to "crash" into a hierarchy is alluded to in his discussion both of chieftaincy and of education. The relevance of tournaments of value is clear here, although Geschiere's own ethnography of such occasions may well be the only really detailed evidence that exists in the written record. Beyond even his efforts, there may be a "social situation/case study" approach that could well be adapted to focus on the whole gamut of ranking dynamics at play on such an occasion: money, status, symbolic elements, display and distribution, and their ongoing force. So both these articles return us to ethnography and experience.

### *African Aesthetics, Performance, and Ranking*

It may seem odd to place Barber's article (111–24) on expressive forms and Udry and Woo's paper (139–53) on economic decision-making together, but on this matter they do belong together. Barber asks how competitive

heterogeneity is ever composed into any kind of fixity at all. She points to a basic conundrum: that people were constantly living on the threshold between being agents themselves and the objects of the agency of others, where they could be mobilized as equivalents, stand-ins, and extensions of one another, and where the power of the notion of ordinal scaling defined the often-vertiginous rise and fall of individuals against a possible conceptual fixing point in the act of sacrifice. While, like Geschiere and Adebayo, she gives evidence of varied forms, her real emphasis is on the process by which competitive composition informs those performative moments. Udry and Woo's paper endorses, in a very different way, a performative interpretation of the sense of social ranking expressed by respondents when they were asked about expenditure. Their conclusions were the most surprising of all to me. My own reanalysis of the Ghana Living Standards Survey had been something of a stretch; one friend said that I had literally stretched the evidence on the rack until it was forced to confess. That Udry and Woo confirmed my findings and extended my ordinal interpretation—using, as they point out, their own more sophisticated statistical methods—opens up several new vistas. One main conclusion is worth juxtaposing to Barber's analysis in the context of the present enhanced attention to ranking: "When information . . . is very imperfect, then surveys that pose impossible questions could well lead to responses that correspond to norms that are at least partially shared . . . (on) a normative social gradient" (Udry & Woo 2007:151). In other words, at any one time people know so precisely where they stand in conceptual and social ranking, even under competitive and turbulent circumstances, that they can readily compose mutually consistent *performances* of the corresponding "facts." Their answers are more like a praise song to their existential situation in a social world than an objective account of "what happened."

### *Inroads beyond Atlantic Africa*

There are powerful implications to Udry and Woo's conclusions: both about the economics of ranking and the methods of budget studies. They find similar results beyond Atlantic Africa, and further, they endorse a reanalysis of Engel's Law in Europe in light of different mediation of incomes and expenditures by the formal financial institutions. So finally, after more than fifty years, Akan money management is no longer an incomprehensible aberration but perhaps an exemplar of a much more widespread set of empirical and methodological phenomena that has been "orphaned" by the purification processes within Western modernist thinking (see Latour 1993; Callon 2005). Berry takes this ambition further, from the very outset: "all economic values are situational," she says (2007:158). By seeing history as an ordinal scalar value in itself, she only has to point out how widespread the relevance of the past is within each transaction to make her analysis of African versions of history-as-value exemplary of many

others. She is so bold as to suggest that it is the banks and formal financial institutions themselves that play the role of creating and fixing this kind of scale, a notion at odds with the usual depiction of banks as mediating market-driven ratio-scale calculations, particularly on the price of capital. Like Keith Hart (2000), she suggests that the bank is a creator and formalizer of social memory, indeed the custodian of the "social capital" that "transactors use to assess one another's resources and reliability" (2007:62). If one adds to these functions the creation of qualitatively different financial instruments, criteria for qualification of access, and a host of other structuring definitions on nominal and ordinal scales, these might well be more powerful than anything that could possibly be summarized as the mediation of forces of supply and demand in the capital market. Again, "the memory bank" has been an orphan subject, in general. The social prominence of historical referents in the African transactions Berry describes opens up the capacity and the imperative to "see" them more clearly elsewhere.

### *Formal Interventions into African Dynamics*

The articles of Maurer (125–38) and Ferguson (71–86) show how the formal financial world adapts readily to conditions that are quite specific to Africa at the turn of the twenty-first century: the realization that most of the population will never work in the formal sector and the dynamics of capital flight resulting from political conflict. Under these circumstances the formal sector has found logics and practices within its existing repertoire that could be further developed. At the stage that both papers are addressing, the result is the situational extension of specific kinds of payments. Maurer (2007:134) goes a step further to claim that, in general, "payments can be much more important than market transactions." Payments do not work on a calculative rationality but rather on a manipulation of definitions and dates (see Berry [2007:64] on temporal scales.) His perception (which I agree with—see Guyer 2005) applies to markets everywhere. There are mini-monopolies, fines, fees, duties, and so on secreted within much of what is presented to us as "market prices." If we follow out the logic, a system of payments is inevitably based on nominal and ordinal scales (as I will pick up again later), many of them formalized in the state and financial sectors (see Berry, this issue). The fascinating idea that both Ferguson and Maurer insist on, presumably independently, is that these scales do not—in fact, or at the moment—form anything like the "vague whole" that Verran (this issue) encourages us to assume as a premise for our work. For Ferguson, "many-sided and complex" arguments meet "opaque 'informalities.'" They produce "no single logic or rationality," but rather (quoting *Marginal Gains*) "separate formalities that coexist with—and shade into—conversionary modes of exchange" (2007:80,82,84). For Maurer, the result is less a gradient than a "tangle of incalculable payments" (2007). For both, the incoherence of this situation is only "writ large" in Africa; its conditions

of existence emanate from financial provisions and practices within the world economy more broadly. It would be, then, a perquisite of political power to control the intersection of payments, “market forces,” and the ordinal scales that bridge the two. So the relative coherence of the wage-price-tax nexus within livable logics in Europe but not in Africa (see Roitman 2005) should be traced to the politics of the definitions and the ordering principles that produce that effect. The politics of ordinal scales becomes a crucial topic: that is, whose scales, configured how, imposed on whom, and lived in what way.

### *Back to General Theory*

From the allusions and mid-level theoretical arguments of the rest of us, Roitman (155–61) and Verran (163–82) both turn to a more direct engagement with general theory. Roitman asks, rightly, what kind of grounding informs my concepts and the connections among them, particularly those related to the stabilization of value scales, and even the plausibility of rank itself. What is the difference between routinization, institutionalization, and formalization? Do institutions arise out of aggregation? If not, how are practices to be seen as enduring and reproductive? And, I might add myself, how does one of my favorite processes, “configuration,” really work? At one level, these questions take us back again to ethnography: to the articles of Geschiere, Adebayo, Barber, Udry and Woo. At another, they lead straight into the problematic brought to us by Verran: Can we work from a “vague whole” to “specific parts” and back again through “a series of mediators”; from a “relational empiricism” of qualities to a style of “modal reasoning” that stresses “ordinal number,” where relational qualities are intrinsic (as distinct from calculation, which applies to discretely defined “goods”)? Verran’s clarification of the differences between two constructivist theories, and their links to different styles of empiricism, is enormously helpful for a new reading of epistemology and philosophy. I claim empiricism in the book, in the sense of respect for the sources and “pattern recognition” in their content, but I worked without the kind of philosophical grounding she calls for. That task will take much longer than the time allowed for preparing this response. So, in the interim, I take up her strong suggestion that the theoretical work of Michel Callon would be fruitful.

One recurring question will affect how we engage with theory based in non-African realities: What is the theoretical status of “Africa”? Geschiere (this issue) worries about reinscribing an African exceptionalism. One of *Marginal Gains’s* reviewers (Ralph 2005) is concerned that theorizing from Africa can limit our own imaginations about applicability to the European and the formal sector. I think the articles here begin to answer these concerns, but the issue does remain something of a conundrum, because the-orientation of mutually constructed differences in the global economic world is weak. I do my best.

## Callon, Some Commentary from France, and the Continuing Challenge of Europe.

I am not necessarily well prepared for this engagement because I can take on neither the deeper philosophical issues nor the detailed empirical work of the ANT (actor-network theory) scholars. But it is certainly worth indicating convergences and divergences that arise from Callon’s programmatic statements (especially 2002, 2005, n.d.). Clearly, as Verran suggests, I have imbibed more of this thinking than I was aware of, largely via the work of others. Callon (2005, n.d.) enunciates his core assumptions for the study of the multiple capitalisms that he sees emerging from the declining expectations that modernity can—or should—be maintained as a coherent model of life. The similarities between his assumptions and my own in *Marginal Gains* are obvious, especially in his claim that “the performativity of economics means assuming that agency is distributed and that concrete markets constitute collective calculative devices with variable, adjustable configurations” (2005:3). A specific market is created and enacted by “disentangling” commodities and services from their embeddedness in a proliferation of potentially relevant characteristics and identifying the particular agencies and technologies that are deemed by participants to be apposite to that market at that time. The terms of market involvement are constantly shifting, so “instead of assuming, for example, the existence of a spirit of capitalism or an overall logic of a mode of production, we can relate certain forms of economic activity to be more or less chaotic . . . [with an] upsurge of [varied] calculative agencies” (2005:5). Modernity, Callon points out (following Bruno Latour [1993]) involved a continual process of “purification” of categories of “goods,” a process that inevitably produced “hybrids” as science and the world shifted, thus necessitating another round of purification, and so on. The embrace of performativity, “chaos,” “mixes and hybrids,” according to Callon (2005:1; 2002), is a sign that “we are busy leaving the modern world or (rather) . . . the modern project” for “an economy of qualities” rather than goods, where the value of different components of complexes fluctuates according to which “agent,” using what technologies, is engaged in the process. This is a diffuse, participatory economy, in which people themselves create knowledge and values, and social scientists are “in the same boat as the actors themselves” (2005:1). “It is economic agents, from either the demand or the supply side . . . that construct . . . singularities and substitutabilities” (2002:201).

Beyond Verran’s direct invocation of Callon’s ideas, there are clear synergies between his work and the other articles in this issue, infrequent as the explicit references may be. Maurer’s critique of method corresponds to similar perceptions of the world as Callon’s. My own division of *Marginal Gains* into “Scales” and “Performances” seems to echo the concept of “an economy of qualities.” And Barber’s praise songs of self-creation, made up of multiple labile sources and references “disentangled” from their origins

and “reentangled” in chaotic profusion, would seem an absolutely apposite aesthetic form for this abandonment of the modernist project.

Is this convergence the result of theoretical osmosis or historical convergence? Perhaps—as I speculate here—it is the product of a renewed and parallel attention, in different locations, less to newness than to what was *always* there, in people’s experience and practice, though overshadowed by theories too parsimonious to produce a rich analytical vocabulary to engage with them and too successfully hegemonic, or militant, to try. As Sidney Mintz (1998) points out for the Caribbean, it was always global and always creole, long before globalization and hybridity appeared on the conceptual horizon. These qualities were just lived most intensely in a place that was considered marginal, and whose people’s experience was not considered crucial to general theory. Like the Caribbeanists, I think the apparent convergence also comprises disjunctures that would be important for all of us if we could define their contours.

Work in Africa is full of evidence that “modernity” (in Callon’s terms) *never* really worked in practice as a full-fledged cultural, political, and economic project. The Atlantic trade and colonial rule left “expectations of modernity” (Ferguson 1999) but little reality; it left the idea of wages, prices, and taxes but no coherent connections among them (Roitman, this issue); it left states that Davidson (1992) argued were “the black man’s burden.” I argue in *Marginal Gains* that colonialism left a legacy of living with mercantilism: European opportunistic self-protection, conservation of metropolitan wealth, and entrenched concepts of difference. In other words, the version of modernity that arose in Africa was a project that Europe (and capitalism) certainly practiced and still does, though it no longer acknowledges these characteristics as part of its “modern project.” And it is a version of modernity that our textbooks hardly describe as having a theory at all. Africa was, from Europe’s perspective (and using the Latour/Callon terminology), a permanent “hybrid”: “traditional” most of the time and “modern” in lackluster fits and starts, for specific places and peoples. So if “we” in the West have never been modern, in spite of all the effort at purification, then Africa has never been “traditional” either (see Ferguson 2006).

So in truth, we are all on the same page here, except—crucially—for the prominence we give in African studies to the *longue durée* with respect to the social and cultural creativity that can emerge where the illusion of modernist “purification” did not fall apart only recently, where it was an “expectation” (Ferguson 1999) but never a full reality. If so, this changes a lot. While our vocabularies might track with one another’s, the economic sociologies of Europe and of Africa might sustain some “mirror-image” qualities and some interesting differences in relation to each other. Callon’s notion of the reconfigured economy as both new and comprehensive would be undermined. It would become worth recuperating certain other pasts and presents, as well as projecting futures, even in Europe. And it

would suggest that the frameworks and struggles in different locations beyond Europe would differ but also inform one another. Different angles and visions result in different emphases. For example, performativity is a foundational proposition for Callon, whereas for me, in this theoretical economic context, it is a logical entailment of asymmetrical and reportorial exchange. Likewise, inequality seems only an intermittent topic in Callon’s programmatic statements. He claims that “the rise of technical democracy” is largely secular and explicitly “democratic” (n.d.). One knows what he means. In fact there is a whole movement of open-source access in the United States that has been dubbed “Wikinomics” (Tapscott & Williams 2006), referring to mass collaborations on corporate projects (at least partly through competitions offering prize money for innovative ideas). By contrast, social inequalities—as one form of ordinality—are a touchstone for every topic in my own analysis, as the articles in this issue so fully endorse. So we may be quite agnostic about how the longer term dynamics of “mass collaboration” and “wild research” will play out. Callon’s analysis is also quite secular in spirit; “research in the wild” seems eventually likely to be quite powerful, and also quite consonant, in its terms, with “confined science” in a manner that reminds me of Habermas’s public sphere at work. I would be skeptical for the United States, with our strong religious voices, and even more for Africa because the rift between formal depiction and local experience is so wide there. Comments by African and Africanist scholars from a seminar at CERI (Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales) in Paris about *Marginal Gains* suggested that I extend my focus on gains and local expertise to ask more about failure and the spiritual power infused in degrees of success.

So location still matters, because in the mercantilist contexts of world history, the specificity of the formal sector’s presence is in practice still the crucible for experience, local knowledge, and long-term trajectories. How we should define the difference between competitive but (theoretically) inclusive ranking within metropolitan wikinomics and finance capital as against exclusionary ranking within merchant, extractive-industry, and philanthropic capital in Africa remains difficult to conceptualize. Some theory and experience would suggest that inclusiveness is by no means assured even in the West, and that some populations become disqualified precisely from participation as full “economic agents” able to construct “singularities” and “combinations” of their own. The ranking of people, which Callon sees as an end *result* of the process, must logically be an *on-going phase* of the “highly reflexive markets” he depicts (2002:202). In one footnote, he does see that the expert activities of professionals “readily mobilize lasting material devices to make these frames irreversible” (2002:216,n.11). That is, some qualities can become progressively excluded from consideration, as expert professionals make sure that the market process does not necessarily reinstate an effective inclusiveness for all agents and qualities at each iteration, as some other passages on perfor-

maturity imply. But the point is not developed.

Two aspects of African experience make it impossible for us to confine exclusions to a footnote: African ranking of persons as one of its most evident and interesting sociological dynamics, and its strong relationship, as I have demonstrated, to commercial and monetary history. Power differentials in finance, politics, and trade with European modernity can never be overlooked. So the more that differentiated formal sector and financial practices—such as the historic limited convertibility of African currencies, the “Basic Income Grant” (BIG), the Grey Money Amnesty, household budget surveys, and memory banking—come to the fore in other places, the more will regional theorizing offer a counterpoint and critique to the still-evident temptation for Europe and America to consider themselves the measure of all things. Ranking of qualities can justify exclusion as well as describe terms of inclusion; it can send people—and whole continents—on quite different life trajectories. In fact, the West might look less chaotic if Atlantic Africa’s aesthetic brilliance at competitive ranking and its experience of political ruthlessness in commerce were used as a guide. American life produces competitions and rankings for absolutely everything these days. People compete to be “at the top,” not only to gain a certain profit margin or income in a class-based production structure, but also to be well positioned relative to intricately defined structures. News reports are quite explicit about this: the price of a particular piece of art is measured by how much higher or lower it is than that of others; the income of hedge fund managers is driven up by competition among them, not for a specific amount but for marginal differences; the level of stud fees for racehorses is calibrated to the racing career (numbers and ranking of races won, by how many lengths, by prize money, etc.); the rating of television basketball games for the costs of advertisements fluctuates according to the ranking of the players, which in turn rests on comparative scoring statistics; and universities and their individual academic departments are ranked according to all kinds of measures, including numbers of articles published, grant money gained, and so on. Somewhere on the way down, oblivion sets in.

In the end, quantification and numbers themselves are used very often simply to return to ordinality, to allow thresholds and powerful discriminations to be set by apparently objective criteria. Although first expressed as measures, these benchmarks produce powerful triage processes in terms of personal choice, legal status, political power, financial qualification. “Priority” has become a ranking word in scales that are often *based* on numbers but not *practiced* as numbers: diseases ranked for urgent attention by the numbers of ill or susceptible people; emissions standards set by degrees of climate change; deviations by various qualification criteria from a prime lending rate. Cases above and below a setpoint are propelled along different pathways. The concept of priority has almost completely lost its original sense of precedence in time. For us, then, ranking processes may be the key mediating link between the lateral profusions of the new economy and



the powerful institutions that seek to control it by shaping the points of triage and making pathways extremely arduous to reverse. At the same time, there are probably parallels and analogs in the emergent processes of ranking goods and people in the popular sector of the global informal economy, although research on them is still in its infancy. Between the tired and misleading binary oppositions between hard and soft methods, formal and informal sectors, modernity and tradition, market forces and political-economic constructions lies the process, the product, and the method of ordinal ranking, where they converge. This is not “complex.” It simply demands multiple analytical vantage points that remain open to one another.

### A Final African Instance

When *Marginal Gains* was completed I myself thought that ranking was more mundane as a concept in the repertoire and phenomena in the world than I now do, four years later—and after reading not only the articles in this issue but also the work produced by my undergraduate students in economic anthropology courses, in which American competitiveness has played a role in one way or another. However, a particular experience in Africa in January 2005 provided a powerful premonition of what I understand now. I was in Cameroon, watching television on a break from work in the middle of the day. The local channel showed the First Lady, Madame Chantal Biya, holding an audience for her annual New Year greetings, on the day following President Paul Biya’s similar event. Literally dozens, maybe hundreds, of women filed past her, to shake hands, wish her a Happy New Year and have their photographs taken with her. They presented themselves as groups, each with a leader: women in the diplomatic corps, wives of the cabinet members, women in business, members of philanthropic organizations, the women’s branch of the party, the wives of each branch of the military, and on and on. Each leader carried a large basket of flowers and fruit, or a gift of some kind, and was followed one by one by the members of her entourage. Each group was called up in an order whose structure escaped the avid viewer, hurried as I was by the rest of the activities of the day. Within the groups, it was clear that the wives appeared according to the ranks of their husbands, and the women attending on their own account seemed to be ranked by status in their organizations. The precision was exact, the logistics highly professional, the women all smiling and gorgeously dressed. Madame Biya presided as if offering benediction to the occasion, its participants, and its offerings, and perhaps also to the intricate performance of relative rank among all those who “mattered” politically in Cameroon in 2005. Either the protocol department was extremely professional and powerful, or else these people, like the Akan respondents to the GLSS budget study, already knew exactly where they

stood relative to one another. This was the national elite, presenting itself as the political class of standard theory, and yet, seen from another vantage point, it was also a public performance made from a profusion of intricate internal differentiations expressed, in the final analysis, as a single-file rank order.

I wish I could have analyzed that occasion in the same way that in *Marginal Gains* I analyzed the episode of “Madame A” at the petrol station by taking part, taking a record, and taking stock of our capacities to theorize the moment in relation to access, value, and the nuances of inclusion and exclusion. There remains a great deal to be done.

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## Notes

1. The papers on *Marginal Gains* appearing in this special issue of the *African Studies Review* are the following: Adebayo (2007); Barber (2007); Berry (2007); Ferguson (2007); Geschiere (2007); Maurer (2007); Roitman (2007); Udry and Woo (2007); and Verran (2007).

I am deeply indebted to the editors of this special issue—Peter Geschiere, Charles Piot, and Mitzi Goheen—for this entire endeavor. They organized the very stimulating panels at the African Studies Association meetings of 2005 and encouraged the authors and myself along the way to publication. Ralph Faulkingham and Mitzi Goheen have been extraordinary general editors at *ASR*. The authors of the papers have offered so many ideas to work with that this response must necessarily pick and choose among them. Janet Roitman edited a discussion in *Politique Africaine*, which I have used here. Beatrice Hibou orga-

nized a seminar at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales in Paris at which several commentators—Jean-Pierre Warnier and Jean-Francois Bayart, in particular—gave me new lines of thinking from the perspective of a efflorescent French theorizing of monetary phenomena and economic life that I have just started to explore in detail. Peter Geschiere read a draft of this response at very short notice and offered important suggestions.

2. See Josette Rivallain (1987) and Colleen Kriger (1999) for evidence of the exponentially more complex realities than those I could incorporate into the text.
3. See the introduction written by Peter Geschiere, Mitzi Goheen, and Charles Piot for this special issue (37–41). The paper presented by Piot at the ASA meeting (Piot 2007) does not appear here.