



Tax

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Paying tax or avoiding tax is part of everyday life across the globe. But what kinds of payments are taxes, and how do fiscal systems shape society? Taxes are often conceived of as a nexus of state-citizen relations and an intrinsic part of a social contract where they are exchanged for political representation and a level of state protection. But ethnographic evidence demonstrates that separating out taxes from other payments is not straightforward, and the motivations for paying tax, or collecting tax, are far from universal. In addition to shaping national and international economies, taxes construct social and political relations which cast citizens and communities in particular roles, such as 'contributor' and 'wealth creator', or 'dependant' and 'scrounger'. As such, taxes are political tools that are wielded in processes of governance. Yet fiscal systems are also crafted from the bottom up, through taxpayer action and taxpayer logics, and gain meanings from the broader historical and cultural contexts in which they exist. In recent years, and in the context of multiple financial, environmental, and health crises across the globe, discussions about how we might build better futures have put the spotlight on taxes as a tool for redistribution. The logics that drive new tax policies and laws are embedded in specific concepts of tax justice and tax competition, as well as the relation between the sovereign state and the international community. Tax is a locus of many important themes, both academic and political. Understanding tax is crucial to understanding our societies.

Introduction

Taxes are ubiquitous in the lives of people around the globe, whether they are hailed or hated, paid or evaded; they are an unavoidable part of contemporary statecraft and everyday economic exchanges. But what kinds of payments are taxes—what is being exchanged, how do taxes gain meaning within their cultural contexts, and how do they structure our economic and social relationships? Why is inheritance tax—supposedly one of the great tools of redistribution—referred to as the 'death tax' in the US? Why do rural-to-urban migrants in Bolivia studiously avoid paying value-added tax (or VAT), but make great efforts to pay property tax? What is the difference between paying tithes to a church and taxes to a government? What do people expect in return for their taxes paid, and how do they justify their evasion of tax?

In the simplest terms, and in theory, taxes are a legally legitimated means by which to transfer wealth from individuals and businesses to governments, and then on to targeted areas of public provision, such as education and health, or to service national [debt](#). Taxes are commonly levied on [labour](#) (income tax), profit (corporation tax), wealth and property (inheritance tax, wealth tax, property tax), and consumption (VAT), among other things. They are divided into direct taxes, such as income tax, which are collected directly from a person and business, and indirect taxes, such as VAT, which are collected on transactions and by intermediaries. Taxes are generally progressive (higher rates for higher incomes), or flat/regressive (the

same rate for all, meaning those on lower incomes end up paying a larger share of their income if the tax is indirect).

Beyond these defining characteristics, taxes exist in political and cultural contexts where they shape social relationships and take on diverse meanings. The anthropology of tax explores these processes and ultimately how people make and unmake society through fiscal [relations](#). This includes a focus on both the oppressive and liberating effects of tax. As a tool for oppression and subject-making, tax policies and practices have been analysed as Foucauldian disciplinary technologies that mould people into self-policing taxpayers (Hobson 2004; Likhovski 2007); they have also been scrutinised as part of hegemonic [colonial](#) systems where they are, at best, out of touch with taxpayer logics (Sheild Johansson 2018), and at worst, instruments of racist oppression (Willmott 2020). But taxes are also held as tools of redistribution in a battle against growing global inequality (Maurer 2008; Piketty 2014), the key to sovereign power in the face of dominant financial logics, and the means through which economically just and environmentally [sustainable](#) futures might be built.

In anthropology, tax has been approached in broadly three different ways: scholars have investigated fiscal systems, including politics, policy, and [finance](#); they have studied tax collectors and the state's desire for compliant taxpayers; and they have explored the perspective of taxpayers. These three areas of focus have all benefited from other areas of anthropological concern, such as the study of the state, [citizenship](#), financial systems, [money](#), [bureaucracy](#), and law, as well as from considerable cross-disciplinary efforts. For instance, the work with and on tax collectors draws on business studies, organization studies, tax administration, and science and technology studies (Björklund Larsen 2017; Boll 2014a, 2014b; Oats & Wynter 2018). Likewise, scholarship focusing on taxpayer perspectives builds on both compliance work and social psychology (Kirchler & Braithwaite 2007).

In addition to these influences, fiscal sociology is the most apparent forerunner of anthropology of tax. In fiscal sociology, as popularised by the early twentieth century economist Joseph A. Schumpeter, taxes are recognised as having power beyond that of shaping obvious areas of influence such as policy and socio-economic relations to include the 'spirit', 'cultural level', and 'social structure' of a nation (Schumpeter 1918: 101, in Makovicky & Smith 2020: 4). More recently, and in the face of a growing global gap between the 1% and the 99% (the wealthy few and the majority rest), fiscal sociology has focused on how tax policies may structure [race](#), class, and gender inequalities, as well as how they can be productively employed to battles these same inequalities (Martin & Prasad 2014).

While fiscal sociology certainly addresses many of the topics that are of import to anthropologists, it approaches tax somewhat 'narrowly'. While it looks widely and inventively for the impact of tax, fiscal sociology often takes for granted that it is clear what kinds of payments taxes are, what kind they are not, and that all this is defined by governments (Meagher 2018). By contrast, an anthropological approach to

tax tackles fiscal questions both broadly and narrowly. In a broad sense, anthropology does not work with one single definition of tax. Nor does it assume how tax works or what it means in different contexts. Its starting point tends to be that people's definitions of tax will always be informed by a larger cultural context, including, but not limited to, other financial exchanges and the diverse ways that public goods and services can be produced (Bear & Mathur 2015; Kauppinen 2020). In other words, the meanings attached to taxes, the relationships and [values](#) they produce and are produced by, are deeply cultural. In a narrow sense, anthropology often explores how an official category of tax is defined and legitimised in a particular setting, as well as the power implications of these definitions.

The social contract and governmentality

A narrower understanding of the role of taxes in society often presupposes an origin story where tax is foundational to the social contract and the making of 'civilised' society, as imagined by Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes (1968 [1651]) and John Locke (1988 [1689]). In this view, [citizens](#) submit to the authority of majority rule and its associated institutions, relinquish certain rights (such as total freedom and self-determination), and pay tax to their state in return for social order, protection of themselves and their property, and political representation. In theory, paying tax within the context of a social contract marks inclusion and privilege. Its core logic involves a reciprocal relationship between states and citizens who are unified in their understanding of the aim of taxes—the creation of an agreed-upon communal world. Across time and space, expectations of what this supposed social contract should include has varied, although public [infrastructure](#), services, and the defence of some human and social [rights](#) are often expected in return for submission to authority and taxes paid.

However, not only do these Anglo-European models of state formation provide just one story of state-society [relations](#), they also naturalise the relationship between taxation, property rights, and political representation (Guyer 1992). This raises the question of whether the social contract and taxes have to go together at all, or whether their link is a mere 'traveling idea', albeit persistent and far-reaching, disconnected from [ethnographic](#) realities and with limited explanatory power (Makovicky & Smith 2020: 8). One does not have to look far to find examples where tax does not function as one side of a positive social contract. In particular, work in [postcolonial](#) societies has demonstrated the multiple and at times diverging trajectories of the [historical](#) emergence of tax use, policy models, or ideas of representation and [democracy](#) (Guyer 1992; Roitman 2005, 2007).

In her work on fiscal relations in West Africa, Kate Meagher (2018) argues that taxes in colonial Nigeria were not collected to pay for public services, but instead to cover the cost of the administration that created 'order' and protection for a select few. As such, the tax system hinged on an extortion logic, rather than one of a fair exchange. Another example can be found in highland Bolivia. Here, a social contract framing of taxes did not resonate with Indigenous populations because tribute and taxes were historically

paid not in return for services or representation, but rather for protection of land and livelihood in a context where it was the state itself that was threatening to take these away (Sheild Johansson 2018, 2020). This resonates with the work of Mohawk sociologist Kyle Willmott, which details the [resistance](#) of First Nations peoples in Canada to the assimilationist project of tax-based citizenship by the settler state, and the preposterous offer of having to pay for one's own subjugation (2020). In these contexts, paying tax does not confer citizenship, mark inclusion, or signal a state-citizen endeavour to bring about an agreed upon collective world. In fact, the opposite is often closer to the truth.

Beyond criticism of taxation by people who feel short-changed or oppressed by their states, high taxes and high public spending are also critiqued from a different political vantage point—that of libertarianism. From this perspective, a 'big' state that redistributes resources is unethical as it violates individuals' economic freedom (Venkatesan 2020). While tax on property is perhaps the most galling to classic libertarians for whom the foundational principle of self-ownership, a kind of 'natural' liberty, generates unassailable rights to property (Venkatesan 2020: 143), so called 'sin taxes'—taxes placed on goods which are deemed undesirable, or considered to have a significant cost on society, such as alcohol and sugar—have recently resulted in heated public debates in many countries about the legitimate reach of government. 'Sin' taxes open up questions of biopolitics, the disciplining and management of bodies and life processes by the government, and the [ethics](#) of employing taxes to do this (Venkatesan 2020: 143).

These discussions dovetail with explorations of tax and governmentality (the powerful processes by which the state makes governable subjects through the shaping of habits, aspirations, and beliefs), although the latter's approach is driven not by libertarian ideology, but by an analytical focus on power. In this body of work, tax relations are understood as both a means through which to shape citizens into governable subjects (that is, tax relations as tools *for* governmentality), and the goals of broader processes of governmentality which will result in compliant taxpayers (Likhovski 2007). An early Foucauldian analysis of tax as a disciplining technology is Alistair Preston's ethnography of a music production company in the United Kingdom (1989). Here, accounting practices became the nexus for both [surveillance](#) and self-disciplining, with the business absorbing implicit and explicit injunctions of a tax collection authority, rendering itself legible to the state. These injunctions included complex bookkeeping systems, new [financial](#) language, and the revised organization of time. A more comprehensive claim about tax as a mode of governmentality is that the taxpayer identity is, by its very nature, not just a self-governing political subject, but one that legitimises the liberal state (Wilmott 2017: 259). The 'taxpayer' is a political actor and an idea, one that holds the government to account through scrutinising public investments, denouncing overspending, voting, and being invested in the government. In this sense, the taxpayer supports and morally justifies a liberal state and its associated limited public spending.

Why do people pay or evade taxes, and why does the state collect them?

Within the broader tax literature, the topic of compliance, or why people pay, is a significant area of study, often connected to political projects that aim to increase fiscal revenue. It predominantly considers compliance to be a societal good, as long as it is ethically enforced. In anthropology, questions of exchange logics are motivated not by a commitment to compliance, but by an interest in understanding how fiscal logics are culturally embedded, how they relate to ethical conversations about a 'good' society (Venkatesan 2020: 142), and how diverse fiscal perspectives shape economic landscapes and economic subjects. The allocation and movement of resources within societies, and the political implications of this, has always been a core topic of anthropology, with the discipline exploring theories of redistribution (Polanyi 1944, 1957), [sharing](#) (Ferguson 2015; Widlok 2017), mutual taking and demand-sharing (Bird-David 1990; Peterson 1993), payment (Maurer 2008), and systems of immediate return amongst [egalitarian hunter-gatherer](#) communities who resist accumulation and property [relations](#) (Woodburn 1982). In particular, exchange and reciprocity are classic fields of study in anthropology relating to the socio-politics of resource management (Malinowski 1922, 1935; Mauss 1954 [1925]; Lévi-Strauss 1971 [1949]). Anthropologists tend to consider reciprocity as key to a pre-capitalist social contract that created stability and society itself. In this thinking, reciprocity is not simply motivated by material interests, but also by a [moral](#) order and sense of mutual [dependence](#).

Building on anthropology's rich scholarship on reciprocity to look at taxes, Lotta Björklund Larsen (2018) has shown how taxpayers in Sweden approach their fiscal relationship from a perspective of reciprocity and a 'fair share'. For instance, one of her interlocutors, a self-employed plumber called Anders, justified taking occasional jobs off the books by pointing to the frivolous spending of politicians. His tax evasion was not rooted in a rejection of taxation as such, but rather concerned with a re-balancing of the fiscal relationship, ensuring it was fair. Anders thus perceived his occasional evasion as an act that protected, rather than undermined, the moral integrity of the fiscal system. Björklund Larsen's [ethnography](#) demonstrates the centrality of reciprocal thinking in Swedish fiscal cultures, and the imagining of the fiscal system as a moral one. The taxpayer view that fiscal exchanges must be connected to a mutually-agreed-upon moral order is also illustrated by Mireille Abelin's work on Argentine elites who justify their tax evasion by arguing that the Argentinian state gives nothing in return. Nor, they claim, has it succeeded in becoming the 'modern' state, or moral order, that they wish to contribute to (Abelin 2012a: 333-7). Tax evasion, or fiscal disobedience (Roitman 2005), can thus be a political act which aims to criticise a range of state behaviours perceived as falling short of the desired moral order.

Reciprocity is one fiscal logic that may undergird tax, but as anthropologists have explored, the perceived and desired character of fiscal relations can vary widely. For instance, on the Istrian peninsula, Croatian business owners lamented the introduction of a digitised VAT system, not because they did not wish to pay, but because the immediate debiting technology built into the system took control away from them over the timing of payments and credits (Smith 2020). This, in turn, left them automatically out of pocket at the

moment of transaction and then vulnerable to the whims of their buyers, large businesses who often did not settle their bills for long periods of time. The Istrian business owners lost trust in the state and rejected the VAT tax, not because they did not see a return for their taxes in terms of services, but because the state was unable or unwilling to promote a fiscal structure and a wider economy which ensured larger companies honoured their [debts](#) in a timely fashion, or looked out for the small business owner. This case also shows that technology and policy design play out in socio-economic and political contexts, and opposition to a particular tax may be rooted in its mechanics, as opposed to whether the exchange itself is appealing.

In peri-urban, highland Bolivia, recent rural-to-urban migrants eagerly paid property tax and commercial licence tax in order to secure living and selling space in the city and the ability to pursue a livelihood beyond the state, not in exchange for representation or public services (Sheild Johansson 2020). In Nigeria, recent fiscal expansion meant that receipts of 'land use charge' paid became crucial to secure fragile property claims (Goodfellow & Owen 2018). In this case, regular payments of land use charge produced letters issued by Lagos State declaring that a [citizen](#) was 'a good one'; these letters, which evidenced occupancy and moral standing, could be mobilised against threats of eviction as well as occasionally used to claim relocation compensation if state-enforced eviction did happen. In the examples from Bolivia and Nigeria, utilitarian desires to ensure security and make a living were the motivating logic of paying tax, as opposed to a notion of a fair return. Notably, in Bolivia and Nigeria, taxpayers disaggregated their fiscal systems and examined the different exchanges that each tax implied, as opposed to viewing their taxes as part of one overarching moral exchange with the state.

Paying tax has also been explored as a technology through which to shore up citizenship claims by migrant workers, both in order to gain legal rights in their place of residence and to satisfy a yearning to have their [labour](#) validated as productive by their host states and fellow residents (Vicol 2020). Conversely, paying tax can be experienced as a form of forced submission and inclusion into oppressive regimes, as exemplified by the relationship between First Nations peoples in Canada and the [colonial](#) settler-state (Willmott 2020). Finally, tax scholars have argued that fiscal behaviour may not just be rooted in any particular motive or exchange logic, but that it fundamentally depends on a combination of material entities, such as [bureaucratic](#) forms and IT systems, and social actors. Studying tax relations by focusing on 'socio-material assemblages' foregrounds that taxation is a distributed form of action that involves multiple actors, habits, character traits, accounting systems, larger structures, such as the procedures for receiving social benefits, and even popular discourses, like that on the [financial](#) crises (Boll 2014b: 300).

A crucial point for the analysis of the fiscal policy of contemporary governments and for any deeper understanding of fiscal exchange is to appreciate the fact that a state's motive for taxing a population is not simply one of fiscal revenue. Instead, fiscal policies are employed by governments to structure and influence the national economy and a range of social relations, including those of health and education,

family finances, gender and [work](#), property ownership, consumer habits, cross-generational sharing of wealth, and many more. In the case of the UK government, for example, it has been suggested that the income that tax brings to the treasury is secondary to its role in stimulating the economy and managing demand—through re-distribution, subsidies, and levies—as well as investing citizens in their nation-state and encouraging electoral participation (Murphy 2015: 53-65). In this way, fiscal policy can be purposefully used to create both markets and citizens.

What are taxes? Meanings, imaginaries, and values

How taxes and fiscal relationships are imagined, both as real and ideal, depends on their wider economic and cultural contexts, including other ‘tax-like’ exchanges. Research on ‘informal economies’ has offered insight into the myriad unofficial payments that populations all over the world make to state and non-state actors and which are categorised by interlocutors and scholars as ‘tax-like’, as they offer representation, [infrastructure](#), service provision, and security, amongst other things. Some examples of these payments include bribes to local state representatives (Roitman 2007: 202-3), fees to unions who offer political representation (Lazar 2008; Sheild Johansson 2020), contributions to community organizations (Meagher 2018), and tithing to churches (Kauppinen 2020; Meagher 2018). While these payments are not made directly to the state, they are made and claimed in order to [finance](#) communal worlds. As Meagher has noted in Nigeria, these payments by ‘informal’ populations to non-state actors, as well as unofficially to state-actors, contribute considerably to the public sphere, including public sector salaries (through bribes), and security (2018), and confound the state-citizen axiom of taxation by displacing the state. They also contribute to collapsing the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ sectors as separate spheres of economic action, by showing how state institutions rely on both ‘informal networks’ and sources of funding to produce and deliver public services and infrastructure (Owen 2018). Lastly, they challenge a narrow definition of public goods as state-delivered resources (Bear & Mathur 2015).

While these tax-like payments may not always be made with the aim of supplanting taxes, they make up a universe of monetary transfers within which taxes exist and therefore function as a contextual evaluation of official taxes (Kauppinen 2020: 39). One such payment that has been explored anthropologically is tithes in Ghana (Kauppinen 2020). The tithe payers’ assessments of the [ethics](#) of the fiscal exchange with the state was profoundly shaped by their perception of their reciprocal relationship with God, who offered divine favour and eternal life, and led them to expect the state to deliver ‘decent lives’ in a broad sense.

The vitality of these ‘tax-like’ payments begs the question: is there analytical purchase in blurring the boundary between taxes, as defined by governments, and the collective pooling of resources beyond the state? Recent work on a Catalonian anti-capitalist [cooperative](#) explores this possibility (Bäumer Escobar 2020). The cooperative was set up to create an alternative economic space, with its own banking system, currency, distribution network, and exchange of goods and services. It also supported tax evasion by

allowing members to use the cooperative's tax registration number when conducting business. In this way, self-employed people could exchange a hefty minimum tax payment to the state for a far lower fee to the cooperative. Vinzenz Bäumer Escobar introduces the concept of 'fiscal commons' to talk about the common pooling of resources beyond the purview of the state, arguing for the recognition of multiple and interconnected fiscal systems.

What kind of payment a tax is, and what kind of activity should be taxable, is in part a question of values. The indeterminacy of values (Guyer 2004), and the inherent problem of commensuration in tax systems—that is, the problem with making different activities and values equivalent with one another—is explored in Matti Eräsaari's study on Helsinki timebanks (2020). In the Helsinki timebanks, time was accumulated and exchanged. Here, one hour of work of any sort was 'worth' one 'while', and the local marketplace was constituted by 'whiles'. Thereby, [labour](#) was demonetised and re-valued through the measure of time. In a move to formalise the timebanks, the Finnish government demanded the whiles be converted to a taxable form (such as labour or traditional currency) and calculated according to what the associated [professional](#) service might cost on the labour market, arguing that by exchanging whiles of professional services, the timebank members were in fact evading tax. This example demonstrates that what and who is deemed as taxable is a question of negotiation—when does a favour in return for a favour become a job 'off the books'? It also reveals that governments need fixed values in order to tax, such as a currency, and a common mode of commensuration, such as a market, to manage a fiscal system.

Tax policy, tax payment, and tax evasion are all acts that create and reflect state-society [relations](#), financial flows, and imaginaries of them. As Viviana Zelizer (1994) has shown in relation to household budgets, people experience [money](#) differently depending on where it comes from and where it is going—money is 'earmarked.' In the same way, larger flows of money are named and variably understood, with different moral and social elements attached to them. For instance, direct and indirect taxation produce very different sets of relationships and responses. Paying 'sin' taxes, such as VAT on alcohol, tobacco, or sugar might be experienced as very different from paying income tax, which is a tax on a person's labour. The taxes paid by a small business, a so-called 'wealth creator', may be viewed as a different money flow from the income tax paid by a health worker in the public sector (whose wages can be construed as being paid for by the taxpayer).

Inheritance tax is another emotive example of how taxes are experienced as more than just flows of money. While inheritance has been shown to be a key driver for wealth inequalities (Piketty 2014), and clearly counters societal aims of meritocracy, it is often referred to in the United States as the 'death tax' (Yanagisako 2018: 5). This is because it is experienced as a levy on the moment of [death](#), rather than the wealth itself. Its critics also claim that inheritance tax intervenes inappropriately in the unity of the family (Hegel 1991 [1821]: 178, in Beckert 2008: 254). For instance, at a moment of death, a [house](#), which may already be experienced by the deceased's family members as their home, is suddenly 'in transfer', taxed,

and then re-ascribed as belonging to the heir/s, or lost if the tax bill cannot be paid. In this way, inheritance tax individualises property relations. While all these taxes are just movements of money, plusses and minuses on a ledger, the money flows are experienced through broader [values](#) such as productivity, bodily autonomy, [work](#), and kinship—as Zelizer (1994) argues, the notions of provenance and acts of earmarking matter.

Fiscal landscapes are not just imagined by taxpayers, but also by collectors, both the policy-makers and the enforcing officers. Tax collection depends on legibility, and as tax collectors often navigate partially blind through fiscal landscapes, with much of the informal economy hidden from them, they need to construct representations which allow them to act (Boll 2014a). The constructions of these representations, which are both utilitarian and ideological, matter to how these collectors then conduct their jobs, such as which business sectors they choose to investigate (Boll 2014a). This in turn shapes fiscal behavior by creating a greater opportunity to evade tax within certain sectors (Kirchler & Braithwaite 2007).

Debt and credit

Imaginaries and value-inflected meanings of taxes gain character through their roles in relationships of [debt](#) and credit. Talking about taxes in terms of credit and debt, benefits, and the broader national economy, tends to invoke [moral](#) acts and positionalities. For instance, public employees may be cast as indebted to private sector taxpayers. Similarly, benefit recipients might be viewed as receiving a credit from the taxpayer (private and public sector ones), while in a monarchy, the royal family could be said to owe their standing to the taxpayer, as they are funded by ‘taxpayer money’, a morally charged flow of [money](#) which signals a demand for frugality and virtuous spending (Willmott 2017: 256). At first glance, [relations](#) of credit and debt appear to be the opposite of reciprocity as they are about the prolonged absence, or the deferring, of exchange. But are these exchange relations really materially different to those that get labelled as reciprocal, such as paid income tax for access to public health service, or is this difference a product of power and imagination? Self-employed day [labourers](#) may argue that it is in fact *they* who are owed, due to their provision of cheap labour or their continued payment of VAT, a regressive tax. Alternatively, large business owners often use the logic that they produce wealth and jobs and therefore should not be excessively taxed. In their mind, in fact, the government or society owes *them*. One does not have to think long to realise that debt and credit are not natural, clear-cut categories but instead defined through government policy and enforced through law. The designation of debt, therefore, requires power-laden stories to make clear who owes whom (Graeber 2011).

As well as creditors and debtors often being interchangeable, it is not obvious that one position is desirable and the other undesirable. Whether and what kind of debt is cast as ‘bad’ depends on the social context. As Janet Roitman argues, there is socially sanctioned wealth that has its roots in debt, while other types of debt are just seen as a negative economic indicator (2003: 212). Additionally, the notion that the debtor is

the subjugated and the creditor the one in power is simplistic. As Marcel Mauss (1954 [1925]) showed almost a century ago, the ability to borrow can be a sign of being enmeshed in social relations and of holding a certain status. Moreover, debt is often linked to investment—a wealth generator with positive connotations. Since debt and credit are thus social categories, rather than purely [financial](#) ones, the study of tax tracks how some actors in a fiscal relationship come to be marked as debtors and others as creditors, as well as investigating the moral baggage, and political impact, of this.

These discussions about the moral character of debt can equally be applied to the debt relations of nations. While the popular debate in many countries indicates that national public debt is currently viewed as a failure of proper budgeting, this has not always been the case; at times, state indebtedness has enjoyed the reputation as a positive cornerstone of society. In the wake of the British 'Financial Revolution' in the late seventeenth century, when the Bank of England was established and public debt was first created through the issuing of government bonds, the 'national debt was not only positively valued but celebrated' (Daunton 2001: 119, in Abelin 2012b: 76). Public debt gave birth to public credit, which allowed investment in society, and agreed upon 'goods'. Taxes were fundamental to international debt relations, as they paid the interest of public debt, not because they financed public goods directly (Brantlinger 1996). Public and political attitudes to national debt have thus shifted through [history](#), and the labelling of debt relations in moral terms always need to be examined as partially political acts.

Global flows

In the face of powerful global [financial](#) markets and growing economic inequalities, both within and between countries, cross-disciplinary conversations about how we organise and how we *should* organise our economies have become increasingly poignant (Ferguson & Li 2018; Haskel & Westlake 2018; Piketty 2014). As a powerful tool for redistribution, tax plays a central role in these conversations. A series of recent events have brought international attention to systemic failures of contemporary capitalism, and the inadequacies of fiscal systems to redress them. Amongst them are the bailouts of large banks by taxpayers after the 2008 financial crisis; the public scrutiny of large multinationals such as Apple, Microsoft, and Google in 2012 and 2013 who had to defend their unfeasibly low tax bills and creative accounting in televised hearings; and the 2016 leak of the Panama Papers, which exposed the tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance of high-net individuals. These events laid bare the extent to which the wealthy evade taxes, and the complicity of much fiscal policy that in the last four decades have protected financial markets through deregulation and the cutting of multiple taxes (Piketty 2014, 2019; Stiglitz 2012). Indeed, governments have long been instrumental in the making of offshore tax havens. For instance, British [colonial](#) authorities, backed by London money markets and the British civil service, created the first offshore tax havens in the Pacific in the early 1970s (Rawlings 2004: 340).

Tax is one obvious technique by which governments may intervene in global financial flows, ensure wealth

redistribution, and close loopholes to battle the ‘paper games’ of the very rich. But while fiscal complicity between governments and the rich has often been the norm, fiscal intervention, and policing tax behaviour, is also not so simple in the twenty-first century. The fundamental problem with taxing our way to more just economies is that taxes are levied by national governments, whilst capital moves swiftly beyond borders. Concerns about how national governments can feasibly tackle large scale ‘tax avoidance’, ‘tax havens’, international ‘tax competition’, and the fear that these phenomena would erode governments’ abilities to reallocate resources for public benefit are not new. But [digitalised](#), contemporary capitalism make these challenges even more significant.

To respond to the demand by nations to share taxing rights, whilst also protecting businesses and organizations from being doubly taxed, international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have been tasked with developing global approaches to tax policy (Mugler 2019: 381-2). The OECD’s work, such as the Harmful Tax Competition initiative, which attempted to name-and-shame, peer pressure, and ‘blacklist’ tax havens—including small, postcolonial non-OECD states—into compliance with international norms, has became a fruitful object for anthropological investigations (Grinberg 2016; Maurer 2008; Mugler 2019; Rawlings 2007). This work asks questions about the making of ‘soft law’ (non-binding norms, agreements, and standards of practice), the relationship between private arbitration, international norm-making, fiscal sovereignty, and [democracy](#). It also explores how international tax experts negotiate new rules and regulations for an increasingly digitalised economy (Mugler 2019). As part of analysing and implementing new tax rules, these international experts need to accommodate the demands of structurally privileged actors that shape the international tax debate, such as tax [professionals](#) working in multinational enterprises. Yet they are also tasked with curbing such privileges in an increasingly politicised field and under the scrutiny of the international community. While tax debates have long focused on the relationship between the nation-state and its [citizens](#), this emerging work asks the important question: what do people owe each other beyond the state?

Conclusion: an anthropology of tax

Tax plays a powerful role in organising national economies and shaping social relationships. Fiscal systems also shape peoples’ perceptions regarding who contributes to society; where wealth is created; the place of the state in the lives of people; the place of people within [money](#) flows; and the [moralities](#) of profit, [debt](#), and [sharing](#). The anthropology of tax has only recently consolidated as a field of study and all these themes offer fertile avenues of further exploration. This line of research will produce both a deeper understanding of tax itself and a chance to use tax as a lens through which to explore wider state-society relations. As an [ethnographic](#) object, tax involves the explorations of multiple scales, from the individual taxpayer’s perspective, and the logics of policy makers, to the functioning of large financial systems. As such, the discipline of anthropology uniquely brings these different scales of fiscal life into the same conversation,

enabling us to understand tax as a simultaneously personal, political, economic, and ethical aspect of our social lives.

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